

FRAGMENTS

AN ALARA ANTHOLOGY

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JUND NURSERY RHYME

by Skibo

A plant was just sitting, absorbing some light.
When along came a rat and sat down in sight.
The plant grabbed the rat with all of its might.
And gobbled it down with not a great fight.

Along came a goblin and sat himself down.
And hungry he was, saw the plant on the ground.
He snatched up the plant, every scrap that he found.
And gobbled it down without making a sound.

Along came a human, the goblin was spot.
The goblin ran off, but soon it was caught.
The poor thing died quickly, it barely fought.
And was gobbled on down without any thought.

Along came a Viashino who saw only red,
It ambushed the human and bashed in his head.
The lizard kept hitting until he was dead,
And gobbled him up, with abandon it fed.

Along came a dragon, who dove from the sky.
The Viashino was quick, but the dragon was sly.
It snapped up the Viashino before it could cry.
And gobbled it up, as the king of the sky.

The dragon grew tired, and folded his wing,
And slept on a mountain assured he was king
But along came a human with axe and with sling
And kill the great beast with one mighty swing.

So no matter your strength, and no matter your will,
There is no one in Jund that Jund can not kill.

COVER ART BY SAM KEEPER, FROM THE PAINTINGS RELIC OF PROGENITUS
BY JEAN-SEBASTIAN ROSSBACH AND THE MAELSTROM BY JAMES PAICK



CHAPTER 1:

THE SHARDS OF ALARA

AKRASAN SQUIRE

BY MERCER

After hours of arguing, yelling, and general disobedience, the boy finished the night by refusing to go to sleep until he'd been told a story. The mother obliged.

"Fine, Taruk," Mahzahdi said as she tucked her child in under blankets of eagle down.

"This is a story of many years ago, when I was still actively serving in Akrasa's military."

Taruk's eyes lit up and the boy grinned. These were always his favorite stories, those of his parents' days on the battlefield. "Oh, okay," the boy said, failing completely to hide his enthusiasm.

"Well, a long time ago, Valeron and Jhess were at war. The war lasted for many weeks. On one day of the war, ritual battle was called by both sides, and I was chosen to be a part of it. The focus was a young knight, barely in her twentieth year, and with enough sigils from her honorable deeds that she might soon become a paladin. I'll call her Collette. She was athletic and dutiful, but small for a knight. She showed no fear to her coterie, but I think she was scared. How could she not be? She was the one that would fight, and only the sigils of a dozen squires, soldiers and knights would be her battalion.

"It was then that we met Jhess's champion--Brynlonn, a rhox ten feet tall and three of us wide." Taruk's eyes widened, but Mahzahdi continued. "The whole coterie was paralyzed with fear. His footsteps shook the ground, and you could feel his voice in his chest. He called out, 'Jhess has chosen my power to bring their victory! Though we six are not weighed down with mere trinkets like you, my strength and training are unmatched!' All of us engaged in the preparatory rituals, we dozen and their six.

"Finally, it was time to fight, and it was brutal. For every strike, Collette barely dodged or was knocked about even as she blocked. As the power of our honor was further channeled through the sigils, Collette was able to deflect Brynlonn's hammer or more easily dodge his strikes. And then finally--and I'll always remember this--the songs of angels were coming from the sigils, and light surrounded Collette like a blanket. She dodged another of Brynlonn's swings and retorted with a mighty sword strike that cut through the rhox's armor and knocked him to the ground."

"What happened then?"

"Well, Collette got right on top of that rhox--so big she could stand on his chest with plenty of room to spare--and pointed her longsword at his face. She demanded that he surrender, and he did."

"Wow. She sounds strong."

"But she wasn't. She was short and thin and barely came up to the rhox's tummy."

"So how did she beat him?"

"Each sigil that empowered her, each squire serving her... Taruk, on this world, honor and virtue and obedience are more powerful than even a rhox's muscle. Remember that when you start being disagreeable," added a smiling Mahzahdi, tousling his hair playfully.

There was a grin on Taruk's face as he finally allowed himself to start drifting off to sleep. Mahzahdi quietly left her son's room, and outside, her husband waited for her.

"Why didn't you let him know where that story actually came from, 'Collette?'" asked the warmly smiling former knight.

"The angels smile on humility, too, Farzha," smiled Mahzahdi, and they both stepped towards their room for bed. Mahzahdi paused briefly on the way to gaze at her first paladin's sigil, mounted on the wall, awarded on the Jhessian shore after a battle against a grey-skinned behemoth whose power never matched her virtue.



AKRASAN SQUIRE ART BY TODD LOCKWOOD

GODTOUCHER

BY SKIBO

Tara picked through the dense jungle as nimbly as a Nacatl. The jungle was alive with sound, birds roosting in the branches, wind ruffling the leaves, and humans hunting far below her on the ground. But the sound that most stood out, the one that kept her moving, was the dying cries of a gargantuan.

The beast had collapsed at the edge of her town's territory, as the village healer, she felt obliged to see what could be done to save the beast's life. But as she approached the location of the fallen giant, she felt a twinge of fear.


Though she had lived in the same jungles as the behemoths her entire life, she had never actually interacted with one. Her entire life was lived within the village, and each step further away from it made her realize how little she actually knew about the massive creatures.

Her thoughts were shattered every few moments by the deafening din of the behemoth's howls. It needed her, it was hurt and dying. She was a healer, and it needed healing.

She put her fears aside, and pushed forwards.

Abruptly she stepped out of the jungle and into a clearing. A clearing in the jungle is a rare sight. The forest's growth is relentless and any bare patch of soil is quickly swallowed.





She stood in stunned awe at the sight before her. Trees toppled as far as she could see, and in the center of it all was a mountain of flesh and bone. In its mad thrashing, it had cleared a large swath of forest, but now it laid hunched over, exhausted.

Tara climbed down from the canopy and approached the ancient beast from the ground.

The next few days were a flurry of activity. Trying to apply her healing magic to something the size of her village took considerable effort. She collected bushels of herbs by day while it thrashed about and howled, and worked on its wounds at night while it slept.

She was fighting a losing battle. The leaf patches she sowed to cover the wounds didn't staunch the blood, and her healing magic barely touched wounds larger than herself. It was going to die.... She knew that in the back of her mind. The beast knew it as well, it stopped thrashing and laid still, breathing heavily as its chest rose and fell with the sun.

Then, one day, it happened. While working on the chest wound, Tara and the behemoth locked eyes. In that moment she knew it was thanking her, but urging her to give up. It had accepted its fate. It was ready to die.

The behemoth that had been the center of her world for weeks was done. She could admit it to herself now. She took the last of the painkilling herb she had collected and placed it into the noble giant's wound. Its body eased as it drifted off to sleep. She wiped a tear from her eye as she climbed up to the canopy to await its death.

Part of her told her to leave, because she couldn't bear watching the gargantuan die. But part of her told her to stay, because she would never forgive herself for letting it die alone. So she stayed, and waited.

She awoke in the night to a chorus of howls. She looked out into the twilight to see the gargantuan's herd gathered around it. Like great trees they circled the dying beast, mournfully crying out to their fallen leader. The chorus of the scions rang through the forest and deep into Tara's heart.

When she awoke the next morning, the herd was gone and the gargantuan was dead.

Tara stopped by the corpse one last time before heading out. In time the behemoth's body will decompose, cover in soil, and transform into a fertile hill. And though she couldn't prevent it's death... she had forged a kinship with the giant beast, and that filled her with pride.

She had left her town as a healer. She would return a godtoucher.



GODTOUCHER ART BY JESPER EJSLING

ON THE HUNT

BY BORNToDIE 17

Three days had passed since they started following the human hunters. Three days away from their mountains to adventure through the forest. Ach! The forest isn't the place for a goblin. It's filled with dangers, just like the plant which ate Nars. Killed by the flora, that's a bad death even for a goblin. He wouldn't end like that. But now, now they were so close to their prize. He could almost taste the fresh meat. Their preys were weakened from the journey, the figh...

A scream brought back Ruuk to the hunt. Bokd was charging headlong towards the surprised humans. He should have charged immediately, alongside the rest of them, instead he hesitated. The battle was going to be difficult, they were outnumbering their preys only two to one. When they begun trailing them they were four to one, but the forest has no mercy for goblins. Ach! Just like everything else in the world. All he could hope for was a nice death. Not like Serg who drowned while they were crossing the river. Some of that water would've been nice, he was thirs...

Fignar pulled Ruuk by the arm, out of his mind and into the fight. Their preys were putting up a ferocious resistance. After all, they were hunters. The four sons of Murlk bravely fought against a single surrounded human. Zorv fell when he stumbled over Bokd corpse. Poor Bokd: first to charge, first to fight, first to die, as always with goblin raids. Well, being killed in battle is a fine death all in all. Muax downed a warrior maiden and got killed while stunned for the emotion. That's the prize goblins receive for their prowess. Murf and Orgyl fell together to a single spear, ending like meat on a spit. They sort of funny, in a sick way. Svafn ducked an axe swing, jumping behind a tree and quickly answered with his javelin.

The skirmish was not going well for the goblins: a crazied human, covered in scars, was rabidly taking down goblin after goblin, unfairly seeking single combat. Joop, Trab and Ghiw fled from the battlefield, while Limn instead opted for a strategical retreat. Fignar's spear finally put an end to the man's frenzy.

Then, through the heat of battle, Ruuk suddenly felt a much more tangible heat. The prey of the human hunters. The biggest hunter of them all. Now it was everybody for himself. He run and then he run and then he run. And then he tripped. He looked back to see he was already safe. A scaly snout, two angry eyes and dozens of hungry teeth answered a roaring NO!

Even though he was paralyzed by fear, Ruuk felt somewhat proud. He wouldn't have bitten the dust against some damned humans. Fate reserved for him the most honourable of deaths. He was goin...

The dragon's hunger interrupted his last thoughts. If Ruuk still had been able to think inside the beast's stomach, he would have been satisfied.



KARRTHUS, TYRANT LORD OF JUND ART BY DAVE KENDALL

MEMENTO MORI

BY TEVISH SZAT

From across the dregscape the word had come. To every bolt-hole and every hideout, every hidden, secret fortification, every point of light where vitals rallied against the death and the dark, the word had come. Not since the fall of Sedraxis, Vithia's once shining jewel, had such words been uttered as were passing in whispers between the mortal holdouts. Not since forever had anyone dared whisper the word hope upon the dregscape, and yet through its vastness the word had come all the same.

Not everyone listened to it. Some knew better, that this new rumor of a land of safety was nothing more than rumor, at best a fever-dream shrieked and echoing across the dying halls then carried upon to distant climes that knew not its provenance and at worst yet another guileful trap to lure those last holdouts from their places of safety, onto the dregscape to die. Still, the word had come, the message was clear. Come home, scattered children of Grixis. Come to Vithia's heart and its soul, somewhere you will be safe and provided for. Come out of the darkness.

Adar Hahn had forced himself to believe in the words that came on the lips of weary travelers, of the tales of a Vithian retreat where the stink of fetor and decay was warded out of every street by perfumed censers, of a place where they had banished the demons and the banewasps and the slaves of the necromancer barons that stalked around every corner and in every shadow. For his wife and his daughter, he had forced himself to believe.

The road was harsh and long. At times, it didn't seem clear, but the longer they followed clandestine signposts and countless whispers rising together to a secretive roar, the more he was certain their path, however long and however hard, wasn't leading onward into doom. A trap, after all, would have been kinder to itself and incidentally to its

victims, ensnaring them swiftly once they were past the confines of their bolt-holes and hideouts, not after months of pilgrimage across the rotted world.

Grixis itself, though, had always had a way of refusing to be kind.

The Kathari were circling lower that day than they had for the past few, as though they knew somewhere in their rotted minds that something was going to happen. The sky, raging and acrid high above, was oddly still, rarely spitting flashes of lightning from cloud to cloud, more a dark mass than a raging, festering horror.

They struck from the earth, not from the darkness like they had before, but from the very ground beneath their feet, as though the dregscape itself was hungry for more carrion. Adar Hahn watched in horror as the bones sprung up, as his wife was impaled and the spears drank up her blood before it could be wasted and spilled upon the earth. He could do nothing but watch as foam pink with blood roiled over the lips he had kissed in stolen, tender moments, as her visage became pale and, life draining from her, she mouthed the word "Run".

It was the encouraging he needed. He had a daughter to live for, and the only thought one could spare for the dead was to set their bodies alight so the necromancers would not take them. Adar Hahn filled his mind with a burning need to get his child to safety, and when her short legs couldn't carry her, he took her hand to pull her along a little faster as she cried and screamed for her mother.

Grixis always knew your weaknesses. Sooner or later, Grixis always struck them. Sooner, rather than later, it came for his daughter.

Panic and exhaustion were what drew the Kathari, he was sure. They came down on their sickly black wings, and Adar Hahn raised the rusty knife he kept as a weapon in



defiance. He knew they were bluffing: he was alive, and far too large to carry off as prey. The Kathari knew it too, and when he put both hands on his knife to ward them off, one swooped down behind, and bore his child into the air.

If that had been it, he would have followed, would have dared to hope to find her alive at some foul nest, but the child as well was too much for the Kathari to bear for long. She gave some final struggle, and fell from the bird-thing's grasp, down onto the dregscape. By the time Adar Hahn crossed the terrain to where she had fallen, he had to fight off the Kathari, yelling and flailing at them to see what he dearly had not wanted to see: just another mangled corpse, somewhat smaller than most, split asunder and torn apart on the dregscape.

It was the day after that Adar Hahn found the stranger, or the stranger found him. He had lost his orientation, his way to Vithian salvation, so to see another vital was welcome relief. If the stranger, twisted as he was, was a necromancer or a servant, he told himself he would be glad. Maybe the dead didn't remember.



KATHARI BOMBER ART BY CARL CRITCHLOW

The stranger had a hovel, of sorts, and invited Adar Hahn in. He brewed concoctions that smelled of something other than rot, noxious herbs relieving in their difference. They sat in silence for a time, and then the stranger spoke, his smooth, deep voice soothing most of Adar Hahn's mind but putting the hair on the back of his neck on pricking edge.

"You have a look about you of a man treated unfairly." He said. "Let me guess, on a wild pilgrimage for utopia?"

"You could call it that." Adar Hahn admitted.

"And you've realized... it isn't what you dreamed."

"My family..."

"Say no more." The stranger replied, giving the hints of a smile. "I know how it is. All too common. You've found your way to the right place. I can help."


"How?"

"I can make you forget. Piece by piece, until you're at peace."

"What does it cost?"

The stranger grinned, his crooked, yellow, and rotting teeth more predatory than inviting. "Nothing you will lament being rid of."





Adar Hahn woke up in a strange place. He remembered, vaguely, entering the hovel, and remembered that it was near another one, belonging to a stranger. Why was he there alone?

He remembered his pilgrimage. He could remember the call. Come to Vithia. Come to it's haven. Come where it's safe and pure. He had been traveling there with his wife and his daughter. He remembered them at his side just the night before. Where were they?

"Layana!" he called, his voice echoing across the darkness. "Alya?" Neither answered, and he stepped out of the small tent, noting the larger hovel adjoining it. Had he just taken the worse set of hospitality?

No, he wouldn't have... He couldn't remember splitting from them, was sure he'd rather sleep on a floor with bone shards than let his wife out of his sight.

"Layana, where are you?"

A stranger came out from the hovel, his back hunched with protruding bone, his yellow, rotted smile somehow both kind and cruel. The stranger shambled forward.

"Now, now." He said, "Don't worry about that."

"It's my wife!" Adar Hahn shouted, "My wife and my daughter! How can I not worry?"

The man frowned, shook his head, and patted Adar Hahn on the shoulder. "You must be confused right now, but trust me, it will pass."

"Where is my family?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"You're wrong."

"How can you say that?"

"I know you better than yourself, Adar Hahn." The stranger said, smiling again.

"How?"

"Let me tell you a story." The stranger replied, "Once upon a time there was a man sitting upon the dregscape. He had no idea who he was, or why he was there. A demon appears next to him, and asks him what is his third boon. The man looks at the demon in confusion, and says he cannot recall a first or a second. The demon produces a contract with the man's signature, and says that for his soul he was granted three boons, but that his second choice was to undo the first. The man thinks, and says he knows what his third boon shall be. He wants to know all about himself, and all about where he is and why. He wants the answers to all his questions about the world and the past. The demon grins and says it knew that would be his choice. Can you guess, Adar Hahn, why that is?"

"No."

"Because, the demon says, that was the first boon I granted you."

"So you're saying I'm the man on the dregscape?"

"Was it so obvious?"

"And that would make you the demon."

The stranger laughed. "If you want to think of it that way." He reached a hand towards Adar Hahn's forehead. "But trust me, you wanted this. And it is for the best."

Adar Hahn's world went black.



CUNNING LETHEMANCER ART BY PAUL BONNER


His hand quivered, and he forced himself to still it. The words needed to be crisp and clear. This would be his legacy to himself, his record should the stranger come again. He had already lost so much! He was sure of that score, though how much of himself was gone he couldn't say. The fetid earth of the dregscape burned well enough, sputtering and charring into a black mass that he crushed to power with a fragment of bone. He hoped he had enough as he put a tough, thick strip of leather between his teeth and took the razor in his left hand, pressing it to his skin. By the time he was done with his right arm, it would be in agony, and his left would look no cleaner than the right. If he started the other way, his right arm would be illegible and therefore useless. Small cuts, he told himself. Careful.

Your name is Adar Hahn, he wrote in his flesh. The razor wasn't as sharp as he had hoped, but that was good. The words would scar well. He rubbed the black dreg soot into the wounds, then washed off the skin around the wounded words with what little water he had. The lines appeared black as night against his pale flesh. They would scar black. His future would have a past.

You have a wife named Layana, he wrote, You have a daughter named Alya. Find them. Find your family.

He could remember their names, and their faces barely, and Adar Hahn knew that he wouldn't have left without them. He couldn't remember why he was on the dregscape: the stranger had stolen that much from him, but Adar Hahn would make sure the stranger would take no more. Rubbings of soot over razor cuts, vague washing attempts, examining the bitter scars. Flesh was the only constant on Grixis, the only thing that was ever really yours. He put his testament in permanent, living flesh. He switched the razor to his now unsteady right hand





Do not trust the stranger, he wrote, The man with the bone-hunched back. The man with the cruel smile. Do not trust him. Do not let him near you. He has stolen your life. Do not trust the stranger.

When his work was finished, Adar Hahn stepped out onto the Dregscape. The stranger was waiting, and looked at Adar Hahn with a frown.

“How many times?” he asked pleasantly, “How far shall I have to go? And look what you’ve done to yourself now.”

“You did this to me!” Adar Hahn yelled. “You stole my life!”

The stranger shook his head. “You sold it to me.” He said, “Just to be rid of it.”

“Where is my family?”

“I thought you might ask that.” He shuffled forward, and Adar Hahn brandished the razor.

“Stay back!”

“It’s for your own good, too.” He said, “I’ve been a generous friend to you, Adar Hahn, but you leave me no choice. I suppose it was always going to come to this.”



The man looked across the world he had no word for. Something about it was revolting, deep down in the core of his being, but he ignored that little twinge and took in the air. It smelt the same as it always had, just like the land looked like it always had. He couldn’t remember why or how it was this way, but he was sure nothing had changed.

He sat down on the hill he had woken up on, put his elbows on his knees, rested his head in his hands, and watched the roiling sky and rotting ground, so strange yet so familiar.

There were markings on his arms, he noticed, strange black lines that gave him a slight pause. He thought they might be... words? But he couldn't decipher them, their lines and curves holding no meaning at all. He knew what words were, how to think them, and as he muddled with his mouth how to say them. But how to see them? No, there was no way. They couldn't be words, he must have been mistaken Maybe, like the ground and the sky, those marks had always been there.



The lethemancer examined the dull, fractured crystal that contained Adar Hahn's bartered memories. His whole life, down to learning how to read and write. It was more than the usual pay, more complete and pure than any he had harvested in a long time. Perhaps this would be a token worth something. Perhaps, he thought as he placed Adar Hahn's memories alongside a few others, he would have enough now to buy back something of his own. He fancied his name first. It would be good to have a name again, and after seeing Adar Hahn, he worried that history might not be what he really wanted to trade for.



CRAFTER

BY SKIBO

The Crafter scowled as he looked over his latest creation. It was leaning slightly to the left. He had made a mistake. A human mistake.

He hated mistakes.

He slammed his fists into the table, splintering it. Why couldn't he sculpt today? Instinctively he checked his etherium enhanced arms. They were undamaged.

They were perfect.

He turned away from his creation" This was his fourth mistake today. Crafter wrapped his hands around the tiny living sculpture and crushed it into slag. He then stepped down the table crushing each of his mistakes in turn until the table was filled with slag.

Something was wrong.

The fourth homunculus was missing. That ugly thing with misshaped limbs, too flat and wide. The Crafter looked out his open window to see a tiny figure walking haphazardly along the canal that ran through the alley. Such a valuable supply of etherium could not be lost.

Crafter backed up and jumped out the window. He didn't worry about injury. His body was more metal than flesh, and any damage he could repair himself. He landed awkwardly on his leg, it buckles and snapped. Crafter lurched forwards and rolled into the canal.

This was bad.

The water passed through the holes in his hands and slipped through the large gaps in his legs. He failed and gasped, and howled as his head slipped under the water. He wished he replaced his lungs when he last underwent etherium infusion.

What a stupid way to die.

Just then his head was pulled up out of the water, and he gasped fresh air. His misshapen creation had affixed itself to him. Its broad flat arms cut through the water and propelled the tiny creature against the current and towards the bank. Crafter had to admit, if the homunculus were perfect, it would have been unable to battle these currents.

Back at his apartment, the Crafter repaired his leg. By his side, his minion hopped up and down. The Crafter smiled peering down at this plucky little object. He patted it on the head...

Then crushed it into slag.

"The next one," he said, "will be perfect."



BEHEMOTH'S HERALD

BY HEYRA666

The elf child clung to her father's leg as she was brought to the priest at noonday. The girl didn't like the priest. His demeanor scared her, the way his eyes seemed empty and wild when he stared into hers. But her father comforted her and she walked with him to the temple. He motioned to her then, with a crooked finger and a rasping, harsh voice.

"Hello there, little one."

"Hello," she mumbled, suddenly incredibly fearful of the fragile creature before her. Something in his voice, perhaps, or maybe it was the eyes. The child shied away even further from the priest, leaving the safety of her father's presence for the first time during the meeting. She looked around, desperate to find something to look at other than the withered figure before her. The young eyes fixed in an oakenwood staff leaning in the corner as if discarded in a hurry. The grainy surface was carved into twisting, turning patterns, tracing images across the young girl's eyes. A fang changed into a talon with a shift of the light, another transformed it into the head of a great beast that the girl had once seen in an old storybook. The old elf gently picked up the staff and extended it towards the child. As she reached out to touch the twisting wood, he began to speak again.

"Child, you have been chosen for a great duty. Do you understand the importance of your role today?"

The child shook her head silently.

"Really?" The wizened old elf turned to the father. "I thought you would have told her the old stories."

The father looked down and grunted. "We thought that as she was to come here, it would be best for you to tell her. You do know the tales better than the rest of the village."

The old man thought for a few seconds, idly stroking the intricate carvings, before replying. "That is true. Well then, little one, come here and I'll tell you a story from when the world was young." The child walked hesitantly over to the priest, eyes mesmerized by the ever-shifting staff. She sat down before him, and he reached out to muss her auburn hair affectionately. She shied away from his hand, and with a sad, resigned sigh he began his story.

"Long ago, when Naya was young, the Great Hydra rampaged through our world, destroying the races who populated it. The thing was an enormous beast with five heads and iridescent skin, shimmering with a glorious sheen that left any living witness in awe of the monstrous creature's great beauty. The Nacatl were devoured in their canopy cities, the humans trampled into the dirt. We elves were caught in the path of the Great One as well, until a mighty Anima sealed him away in a state of eternal slumber, his heads resting on the forest floor with a resounding crash that brought the mountains down, burying his body in rubble.

"From his sleeping body sprang the gargantuans that roam our land, the beasts that govern our lives from sunrise to sunset. The gargantuans are as numerous as the stars and as unique as you and I. So often have we needed to move entire villages in order to evade the path of these beasts. Usually that is enough. However, a few exceptional behemoths emerged from the Sleeping Lord as well, beasts that cannot simply be avoided, but must be sated by blood and fire. I hope you understand how important you will be to the village and how grateful we all are to you, my little one." The child began to ask a question, bewildered by the priest's last entreaty, but the priest put up a hand



to silence her. "There is no time, and we must go. Your questions will be answered in time, my dear." The child nodded and stood up.

Suddenly, her father pressed a bundle of herbs to her mouth and nose, which emitted a sweet, ashy smell that clouded the girl's nose and mind. She struggled weakly, but she was young and weak, and the scent overwhelmed her. She collapsed into her father's arms.



When the child awoke, she was bound and gagged. She looked down and saw that she was lying on a stone altar, with carved in the same manner as the priest's staff. She took a further look around and saw that she was in a clearing, a rare occurrence on Naya. And from the trees on one side of the clearing came a thunderous roar that shook the earth. The child began to scream. She screamed into her gag, screaming for her father, her mother, anyone. Crashing sounds arose from the trees and the beginnings of a clawed foot spanning a quarter mile came into view. The child's screams turned into cries, then whimpers, the moans, until she broke down into pitiful racking sobs. An eye, red as fire and as huge as the sun itself, gazed down on her, neither kind nor malevolent, simply hungry.

And the child's father watched as his terrified daughter was eaten alive, tears of joy streaming down his face.

"Mine is an insatiable god, with appetites as magnificent as the jungle itself."

TIDEHOLLOW

BY SKIBO

The sphinx Ainíssesthai woke from a long slumber and stretched his body out over his throne. Around him his staff was busy at work, polishing the floors, columns, and ceiling. Two attendants came over and polished his face plate, until the etherium metal glistened.

“Ainíssesthai”

Ainíssesthai turned his head enough to see. In the center of the whirlwind of polishing and cleaning, a woman stood. Her body was mostly metal, infused with etherium until her arms and legs were no more than intricate filigree work. He grinned, and contorted his body into a sitting position.

“The Lady of Scrap has come to visit me once more.”

“Indeed, I’ve brought the last shipment.” She handed him a bag, “Enough steel to finish your tower and then some. And a healthy amount of etherium thrown in to forge servants to polish it.”

The sphinx undid the knot on top of the bag and let the contents fall into his large paw. He turned the metal scrap pieces over in his paw several times, examining them for quality. Then, satisfied, placed them back in the bag and clapped his hands.

At once, all his attendants ceased working, and filed out of the room, shutting the door behind them.



Ainissesthai gave a dramatic pause before beginning. "You've held up your end of the bargain, so I shall hold up mine." The still air of the room began to stir as Ainissesthai's brilliant facemask began to glow azure. His eyes glazed over as if peering through eternity. The pupils darted back and forth, as if reading.

Then at once, it stopped. The great sphinx composed himself.

"In the sunken city where the scrappers dare not tread,
waits the tomb of the ancients, in the chamber of the dead,
Under the casket cover, untouched by time and tide,
Lies a box of gold, your prize awaits inside."



Footsteps echoed down the flooded corridors below the streets of Eppra city. The smell of rotting steel filled the stale air. Through the dank passages the Lady of scrap walked with a stern look on her face. She shuffled quickly along. She had an appointment to keep.



She stepped into a large vaulted room. The remains of a basement of a mansion. The glorious mosaics that once stretched across the walls had long since crumbled with disrepair. Water flooded the room turning it into a still pool. The flooded hallways snaked out from this room like canals.

“Ah, good to see you Mistress. I had feared you lost your nerve.”

Argentus was something of an oddity. An adventurous individual he had made a name for himself as a guide and treasure hunter. He spoke with ease, ignoring the rank and status of those around him. A trait the Lady of scrap prided herself in having, but finding disdainful in others.

She had approached him several weeks ago with the job, delve into the sunken city of Eppra, navigate its maze of sewers, and retrieve an artifact. He had, of course, agreed at once, and set about creating the detailed plans they'd need if they were to be successful.

Today, all her dreams were coming true. She'd only need to wait a few more hours.

“I never get cold feet Argentus. Now let's get underway.”

“As you wish, Mistress.” Argentus stepped into the waiting boat, and offered his hand. The lady of scrap ignored it and climbed in behind him. Argentus smiled to himself, and pushed off the shore with the oar. They had several hours worth of travel to reach the center of Eppra city.

“So what brings the queen of the scrappers to the sunken city?” Argentus said after several hours of silence.

"I lost something many years ago," the Lady of scrap looked at her etherium enhanced hands, "I'd like to get it back."

Argentus chuckled to himself, "I think Ainíssesthai has sent you on a wild goose chase. There's no way anything you've lost could wind up here."

"It's here", she wrung her hands, "I know it is."

"Well, we'll be arriving in the burial chamber in a moment. Just don't get your hopes up too much."

The corridor opened into a large burial chamber. The massive chamber had vaulted ceilings seven stories high. An oculus in the ceiling let a tiny beam of light through. The beam landed on the burial mound in the center, a patch of soil rising from the flooded room. The Lady jumped from the boat as soon as it grounded and ran up to the top of the hill. As the sphinx had spoken, an old granite casket was lying in the center.

Argentus came to the grave and ran his hands over it. It was rare to find artifacts from before metal became the norm. The granite casket was ornately carved.

"Well don't just stand here, open it," the lady said, nudging Argentus.

With a great labor, he pushed off the top. Before them was a veldaken skeleton. Its body glistened with talismans, jewelry, and fine clothing. At its feet laid a golden box.

The lady of scrap picked up her prize, took a deep breathe, and opened it.



Argentus waited for several hours before grabbing the lady of scrap by the arm and pulling her into the boat. He had work to do and couldn't wait anymore.

The lady of scrap sat in the boat and caressed her face. She peered into the curious mirror she found in the box.

In her reflection, she saw herself as she was many years ago, beautiful, without wrinkles or blemishes.

As the sphinx had promised, she had found her youth in the sunken city.



LICH'S MIRROR ART BY ASH WOOD

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM

BY WIZARDS_WHITE_KNIGHT

Consciousness returned, filling her vision with the neverending plains of the Topa Savannah. All her plans, all her ambitions, reduced to nothing by her conniving "partner". Together they had planned their heist, gaining entry inside the barracks using the good faith Gwafa had garnered over the years. She had slipped in undetected, her years of training as an Infiltrator serving her well. The Sigil's were in her grasp, when the yelling began.

Fearing that she had been spotted, she used a quick incantation, allowing her to hover up to the roof, seeking to blend into the shadows that were cast by the insufficient candlelight. Hovering above the door, pressed against the roof, she watched as Gwafa led a group of intimidating RhoX guards.

"She is here somewhere, I'm sure I noticed her slip in the gate as I was drawing my caravan within your walls."

The RhoX split up, searching the barracks for her. Betrayed by her employer, her partner in crime, Hakhana felt her blood boil. All her life, she felt different from those around her. She felt stifled by the caste system, and boggled at the lack of ambition that others displayed when it came to rising above the Mortar rank. The military offered her a chance of expansion, but it was equally confining to her sense of freedom. When she met the merchant Gwafa, she felt she had found a like soul. His ambition was refreshing to her, and although his ultimate prize seemed to be wealth (something Hakhana cared little for), she was pleased to have found someone who was willing to rebel against the system.

But it was Bant's system of Honour that Hakhana had assumed Gwafa would follow when she agreed to work with him. 'Honour among thieves' she scoffed to herself, realizing that she had been setup, used by the man she had judged to be just like her. She watched him, loathing him for what he was, for what she realized she must represent. Would she ever sell out a partner, a friend? No, she wouldn't. Gwafa was something more than she, driven by greed and willing to do whatever it took to get what he wanted. If only she could draw him away from the last Rhox, she could slip her rapier in between his ribs, pierce his heart and spit on him as his lifeblood slipped out from his deceitful body.

Using another incantation she had learned as an infiltrator, she conjured a loud clanging noise at the Barracks entrance. The Rhox waiting with Gwafa hefted his halberd, and set off back the way he came, shouting orders for Gwafa to stay put. Hakhana waited a few moments, pressing herself tighter to the shadows, as the other guards ran back through the room, heading towards her distraction. When she was sure the coast was clear, she deactivated her hover spell, withdrew her rapier and lunged at Gwafa's black heart...

...at least, she tried to. Her coin purse, the one Gwafa had insist he give her as an advance payment, suddenly became overwhelmingly heavy. Upon deactivating her Hover spell, she fell unceremoniously to the ground. Gwafa slowly turned around, and stared straight into her eyes.

"My dear Hakhana" he whispered, "fancy seeing you here." Slowly, without any fear, he reached down and took the Sigils from her grasp. She tried to grasp them, to hold on, but it took all her power to hold her head up. He muttered a cantrip, summoning a small pouch into his open hand. Deliberately, he dropped the Sigils in one by one, before waving his hand and dismissing the pouch. She tried to curse at him, but found her tongue held firmly within her mouth. Holding a finger up to his lips, he shushed her in an exaggerated fashion. With a wink, he called for the guards.

Her trial was quick, considering she was unable to speak in her own defense. The Sigils were nowhere to be found, an accomplice was assumed. She would not (could not!) name them, she was forced to take part in the excommunication ritual. Looking around at the endless plains once more, she suddenly realized what it meant to be Bantian. The ideals of Bant were there to protect it's citizens, not suppress them, to uplift a community, not an individual. She wagged her tongue, rejoicing in it's freedom. Gingerly, she stood up, feeling freed from the cursed coin that Gwafa had forced her to take as sign of good faith. With a depressed sigh, she had realized that she was finally free of the caste system she had secretly railed against all her life. She was Unbeholden, her own boss, master of her own destiny.

And it felt very, very lonely.



PLAINS ART BY JOHN AVON

THE CONTRACT

BY SKIBO

"It doesn't make sense."

Sirv finished his calculations for the hundredth time. And yet it came up the same. According to his calculations there should be five varieties of magic, not three. And yet as sure as his lungs breathe, he knew his math was true.

He started a hacking fit, coughing up so much blood it turned his hand red. He was running out of time, he needed to get to Unx. He wiped the blood from his hand and rolled up his notes. They would have to wait until he return, if he returned. Before he left home, he took one last look at the tiny hovel he had carved out for himself, and closed the door.

The trip to Unx was far more taxing then Sirv expected and he reached the outskirts of the city by dusk. Using a few tricks he'd learned from clinging to life for so long, he easily evaded the large, mindless armies of Unx.

The city of Unx was a crumbling hellhole unfit for human habitation. Deep within the center of the city, rising from the city like a bone jutting out of a rotting corpse was the tower of Unx. The tower was in no better wear than the rest of the city. It leaned sharply to the right having lost much of its foundation. Ghostly fires lit the inside of the tower, the only sign of habitation in this dark dead place. Sirv headed there.

The stairs leading up the tower were crooked and in disrepair. They creaked and strained under Sirv's light weight. Each step sapped a bit more of his strength. But after long hours, he finally took a step into the master chamber.

The room was too dark to see. A cackling laughter filled the stale air. Cold lights flared up across the room, illuminating a dark figure in the center of the room.

"It has been a long since I last tasted the scent of live flesh. Tell me why I shouldn't drain your life now and add your corpse to my army?"

Sirv sagged under the weight of a long life. "Archdemon I have come with a deal. I have spent my entire life studying the nature of magic. I just need more time... a little more time."

"You come to a master of death for a new lease on life? You may know magic, but you know nothing of demons."

"Archdemon, my body is failing me. I don't need a lease on life, I need to strip away my weakness."

"What do you propose mage?"

"Take my vis, and turn me undead. Just leave me with my mind."

The Archdemon's face cracked into a wicked smile. A blue fire burst in his hand. As it contracted it congealed into a papyrus scroll. "This is a contract of unlife. With the added stipulation that when you are complete with your work you'll return and lead one of my armies as a general."

Sirv did not hesitate to sign it.

The years pass deep within his hovel. His cold flesh hands doing calculation after calculation. The ink worn to flesh, the flesh worn to bone, the bone worn to nubs. Years, and years, and years, and years, Page after page, identical, the same.

“...There can’t be five types...”

“...There can’t be five types...”



AD NAUSEUM ART BY JEREMY JARVIS

VIOLENT ULTIMATUM

BY BARINELLOS

Jund.

A primordial world of fury and wrath. The dark skies overhead roiled violently, ashen clouds crackling with unnatural lightning, the hellish glow of myriad caldera painting the underbellies of the lofty overcast with fire. Perpetual storms churned Jund's primal skies, though rain would never fall, the heat of the hellish crags and spires below boiling the rain into the clouds endlessly even as it fell. Overlooking this furious horizon, buffeted by the dread zephyrs on this harsh world, a man navigated the skies.

Sarkahn Vol pumped his wings again, catching an updraft and ascending to greater heights. The exultation he normally felt at soaring the skies was muted by his black mood, a newly acquired weight that nagged at him. He had watched silently from the cliffs as the dragon mates had hunted the odd rat-like goblins of this world, picking them off in groups and circling back, one always as a distraction while the other fed. He doubted the pitiful creatures below had even known there was more than one of the great beasts feasting upon them. Satiated, the pair had flown back to their crystalline hoard and he had followed.

He had tested them then, slow witted and besotted with full bellies, but they had only been a match for the dragons he already claimed dominance over. Still, defeated and marked, they made an acceptable addition to his cadre. Not even considering the gemlike drops of sangrite he had culled from their blood during the battle. His mood lightened briefly at those thoughts. Yes, at the very least, he gained new beasts to command from this... exercise.

"These dragons are so like the warlords of home. Fighting for a dominance they already possess. Full of rage and dim with it." He wondered as he flew, if the warlords of his distant birthplace had been hunted to extinction yet, as they had done to the dragons of his homeland. He smiled once again at that semblance, hoping revenge had been visited upon those fools.

His destination loomed ahead and Sarkhan Vol began to descend, seeking the grounds of one of his favorite spots to focus himself for his ritual trance. His feet lightly grazed the ground, his boots scraping the harsh ground, and he dismissed his enchantment, staggering as the wings ripped from his flesh, dissolving into the aether as if burned from within. He staggered, feeling quartered as they departed, as if the dismissal had taken the bulk of some essential part of him with it. He called to the mana seething in the stones below his feet and tried to fill the emptiness of vitality in his soul.

Sarkahn slowly walked the path to the steppe above, his back straightening again after a few steps, the warm ferocity of the mana steeling him once more. Unnoticed, as the shaman ascended the worn stones, the scrag bushes along the path behind him shook as he climbed.



Sarkahn's eyes slit open, the rough stone of the plateau coming into sharp focus after his dreamlike state. His trance hadn't been long, it usually wasn't, and it still remained fruitless. Despite his best efforts he was yet again unable to locate that which he sought. He was without the dragon that was truly worthy of his worship. As his soul rose fully back to Jund, he found he was not the only seeker upon this steppe.

"You might as well come out. I know you're there." Sarkahn called.

The bushes across from his position parted and a trio of Viashino, the great ape-like lizardmen of Jund, stepped out of their shadowed and vined cover. They were all males, as far as Sarkhan could ascertain, one of them a great brute who was clearly their leader. They were all large and thick skinned, their thorny hides wrapped around massive backs and forearms. Their crocodilian jaws opened in a vibrating rumble that started deeper than their throats, from down in their distended bellies. All three carried weapons, thick paddles lined with teeth they called kikkach, and their tukatongue rope belts were hung with half rotted meat, which notably included a few human hands.

The Carrion Thrash then, just wonderful, Sarkahn thought as he stood, lifting his staff from his lap as he did. The largest, the brute wearing the necklace of teeth stepped forward.

"How nice of you to invite us out." It quipped with a harsh rumbling voice. "It is rare to find prey who will not run."

"Oh, I've no intention of running from you, beast. I want you to know what killed you." Sarkahn sneered.



SARKHAN VOL ART BY DAARKEN

The trio bristled and hissed in wounded pride. The speaker hefted both his kikkach and growled. "For that, I will lick your guts from my blade palehide." He gathered himself to charge as he spoke, his muscles bunching under his scaly hide and his claws going rigid.

"You have a big mouth." Sarkahn growled back. Mana jumped to him and his forearm swelled, sinew and skin tore and popped as scales ripped from beneath his muscle. His hand was lost as his arm terminated in an effigy of one of his great tyrants. He thrust the appendage forward and preternatural light spilled from its eyes, the maw opening and a hellish inferno spilling forth. Embers danced against the glare and the scenery was lost as the air turned to plasma and caught the charging lizardman. He had no time to scream as the dragonfire greedily ate its flesh. Moments later, Sarkahn lowered his arm and the black scaled flesh sloughed off, leaving his hand as it had been before.

The Viashino carcass staggered forward another step. Its ribs were blackened and its lungs exposed and cooked, all the flesh having been charred from its chest. Its skull was worse. Black blood oozed from its heat warped jaw as it worked in death spasms. Burst eyes wept gore and finally the corpse fell smoking to the ground with a heavy and final thump.


The other two Viashino stepped forward, clicking and rumbling in their native tongue. They both broke into jovial laughter, a hissing sort of screech, as they picked up their fallen comrade's weapons.

"What's so funny?" Sarkahn asked monotonously.

"We do not know whether or not to thank you palehide." One of the two answered in its scratchy deep voice.

"For what exactly?"





"When we kill you, we will have both raw and cooked meat for the Thrash tonight." They both broke into another fit of hysterics. Sarkahn just scowled.

"Do you have any last words palehide?" The Viashino asked as the pair edged closer.

"Words?" Sarkahn grimaced, "Words are a waste of time. Destruction is a language everyone understands."

The viashino leapt and Sarkahn called all of his mana to himself, spinning his staff in an ornate pattern as they crashed forward. He cast his head back and flung his arms out to his side as light and sound exploded outwards from his body in a wave of heat and sheer concussive force. The airborne lizardmen met the wall at full speed and fell into it, their bodies colliding with solid air and heat. They stopped in midleap as their skin and muscle was ripped from bone by the force of the explosion. Their viscera was turned to so much meat and their bones were crushed, reducing them to fragments and then to nothing more than ash and shadow in a single overwhelming instant. The wave did not stop with them as it rippled outwards, blasting the earth and scattering the remnants of the shaman's attackers to the four winds.



Sarkahn opened his eyes once again and gazed upon the inferno painted clouds far above. The silence around him was deafening, a dull background roar of tempestuous winds and boiling rock. Slowly he lowered his arms, gripping his staff tightly, feeling it's weight pull him down from his exertion. As his gaze fell, the sight around him had been terribly altered. The ground was volcanic glass, blown into jagged rippling miniature waves stretching outwards from where he stood at the epicenter. He bent and felt the smooth obsidian beneath his rough and cracked fingers.

"Still warm." he sighed and frowned. He had enjoyed the view from here. It was a shame to have had to sacrifice it, especially for such dim, unworthy creatures like the Carrion Thrash. He gathered the dregs of his mana, tapping into the crackling mana of mountains on worlds far flung beyond Jund. Fledgling wings slid from his back, no larger than a whelp's. Bones popped as they contorted and grew unnaturally swift. He leapt forward, dragon wings creaking as hot acidic wind filled their leathery skin. With great sweeping beats, Sarkhan Vol, soldier and shaman, began to soar away from his ruined panorama.

"Perhaps I should find a new place to seek my trance. A mountain near Rift Valley, possibly, or the tar fens of the lowland jungles." He said. "Many options to consider. An entire world's worth..." With that, Sarkahn Vol, walker of the worlds, vanished into the volcanic clouds of Jund.



VIOLENT ULTIMATUM ART BY RAYMOND SWANLAND





CHAPTER 2:

SHARDS CONVERGE

ANOMALY

BY DAV FLAMEROCK

There was an anomaly.

The winds had shifted, but Hani knew this was no stormcaller's doing. She knew all twenty-three winds of Esper by name, and from where she stood on the spire of the Argent Steeple, she could hear them all dancing around each other. As a windwright mage, it was her duty to guide them—tell them where to take the winged messengers of Spherian or where to focus the three colors of mana best for the research mages of the island city.

But now Sorun, the cleansing wind, had found something new and unexpected. The anomaly had appeared somewhere on the Spherian docks, where the city's ships floated in the dark waters, ready to sail out to Vithia or Palandius across the Sea of the Unknown. Across that sea stood the rest of Esper, the world of metal that Hani called home. She knew stories of what lay out there, across the water, thanks to the words and tales that the winds had begun to bring to her, but it was all still new to her. She had only just begun her work among the stormcallers, and while her studies had taught her much about the winds of Esper, the winds had still to learn about her.

Yet Ourus, the Wind of Whispers, had begun bringing tales across the sea to the great city of Spherian. He told her tales of great palaces of filigree, where men and women of all walks of life wore the blessings of etherium. Under the ruler of all Esper, Sharuum the Hegemon, humans like Hani were beginning to earn etherium hearts.

The touch of Sorun ruffled Hani's hair, scattering the long platinum-blond strands as the wind coiled around her and sang through her arms of etherium filigree. White mana


collected in the metal, the cleansing wind blessing her with the thought of impurity. The anomaly lacked etherium.

Is that possible? Hani wondered, turning to look in the direction from which she believed the anomaly had come. With a flick of her wrist and a flash of blue mana, the young mage sent her bidding to Eisha. Off went the Guiding Wind to find her a courier with a vision lens, for she wanted to see this anomaly herself. Around her, swooping between the many winds of Esper, flew the winged creatures that lived in Spherian, from the smallest etherium-blessed dove to the greatest tower gargoyle.

Now, as those familiar winds whirled around her, Hani called a messenger dove to her. Clutched in its talons was a message, from some vedalken to some other vedalken Hani didn't know. Ignoring it, she cast a spell of artifice and commanded the small bird to hover before her as she removed a small glass lens from the creature's etherium eye. The wind blew through Hani's arms and ruffled the bird's natural white plumage. Charged with a spell, the gust propelled the dove down towards the Spherian docks, where the whispering wind had carried to her the words of vedalken enforcers.

"Send the gargoyles who spotted them to watch from the roof of the shipyards. They don't look like any humans we've seen before, so we can't be sure how they will react."

The vedalken were authoritative and emotionless, but Hani knew these humans would have to look completely alien to get such a dramatic rise out of the enforcers. She would have to see who these humans were—so the bird under Hani's control swooped down to a closer vantage point. It dropped past the immense etherium-laced gargoyles and alighted on the edge of the wharf. From where it perched, it could see the newcomers quite well—and through her oculus, so could Hani.



There were two people, and while they looked enough like humans, Hani could see no etherium decorating their bodies. They were barren. Hani had never seen anyone fully-grown without etherium. The first woman wore a high-cut shirt and pants, but her strange attire—what kind of lunatic wore green?—was far less arresting than her human appearance. Unlike every human Hani had ever seen, her long blonde hair was pulled back into a strange kind of bunch that made it look like a tail, and her ears were unnaturally long and pointed, in a manner Hani had never seen before in her life.

The second anomalous human walking with the tall blonde woman looked like a twelve-year-old version of her, a young girl wearing similar clothes and tagging along behind.

Momentarily, the two non-humans were surrounded by the enforcers. The adult woman faced the enforcers strongly, confident in her abilities as they threatened her with their etherium-laced staves. Hani knew that they would take her to a confinement chamber unless she could explain herself, and based on how difficult speech seemed to be for her, Hani wondered that she might end up there. Hani watched the dialogue for several moments through the bird's eyes, unable to hear the words being spoken, until finally the woman shared a look with her daughter and followed the vedalken off towards the Capitol building.

The anomalous humans were gone, so Hani took her eye from the oculus, waving a missive to the winds to send the dove on its way once more. Turning away with the oculus in hand, she spotted one final image through the small glass disc—a sphinx crouched at the top of the Academy, watching the proceedings below with what could only be described as vested interest. Whatever had just happened was important.

Hani had no idea just how important the two newcomers' arrival would be.

A NEW WORLD

BY THE_GREEK_GOD

Asha, why don't you come back? The world needs you. I cannot recognize it anymore; everything is changing, but why? Why are we brutalized by this phenomenon?

The world is changing. The very air is different. It's getting hotter here. They say it's getting colder in the North. There are rumors of thick jungles sprouting in the South, and strange clouds gathering in the North. The sages say they come from the other worlds. We are crushed between them. While we are yet to see what the strange clouds will bring us, the jungles have given birth to horrible creatures, monstrosities. Their simple enormity challenges all of nature's laws. And they have no purpose, except to destroy, destroy and destroy. None of us are powerful enough to control them. Even our supreme beings are powerless against them... But they have to be maintained. Already, fourteen cities have fallen. All crushed onto the ground.

For now, we can only fight for whatever hope is left. We pray to the angels every day for keeping the beasts away. But they cannot be contained. And one day, it finally happened, one of the beasts found its way here –my home. It was the most colossal creature I ever saw. It seemed so alien here, too tall for the sky, too heavy for the ground, too big for this world. It was an aberration of nature. It had so many heads, so many long necks that looked like huge snakes. And its body was like a mountain, hidden inside a cloud of dust, perpetually lifted from the soil by the monster's gigantic feet. It attacked the castle, without reason, eating rock and marble. We were waiting on a nearby cliff, looking at the horrible destruction. We were so many, but so small. And we charged the beast. We were fools to think it could be defeated. Its heads snapped and ate everything; soldiers, rhinos, leotaus, even angels. The angels, the sacred beings, the great ones, those who are the protectors of this world, had no meaning for such primitive bestiality. Their teeth chewed on them, as if they were merely... food.

And after an hour, the creature lost a head, and we lost a thousand souls into its stomach. How can a world resist such a thing? I realized that our time here was done. Humans and rhinos could no longer live here. The time of the beasts has come.

I kneeled before it, the new angel of this new world, begging it to destroy me. Bant has fallen, at last. And I will embrace my death, so I may not see what horror my ancient land will become.



APOCALYPSE HYDRA ART BY JASON CHEN

THE BEAST THAT CAME TO ESPER

BY SKIBO

I've seen murder before. I've seen men torn apart, people crushed under machinery, and magics that rot the body from the inside out. But in all my years I've never seen anything like this.

The call came in early in the morning. The sun had barely risen when I arrived. It was a murder. Not uncommon in these parts. The sewers under the city were filled with scrappers. Every week or so someone would find a body stripped of its enhancements floating along.

This body still had all its etherium. That was different.


I examined the body closer. Its etherium enhancements were mangled. Perhaps it was a scrapper who got on the wrong side of the wrong people. People more interested in sending a message than making a buck.

Something was amiss. The filigree on the body's arm was discolored. I touched it. It crumbled. What sort of magic can destroy metal?

I let the etherium dust fall from my hand. If whoever did this used magic, he could track it. I retrieved my etherseekers from my pocket and put them on. The magical lenses allowed me to track the path of the magic user. Etherium normally glowed a bluish green... but the enhancements on the body glowed purplish red. A reddish haze hung in the air around the corpse, and trailed off down the sewer.

I followed quickly. After hours of tracking, the trail ended in a large partially flooded chamber. In the center of the chamber were a pile of bodies. They had the same reddish haze as the first body. Most looked as although they had chunks missing. I stood there as in a stupor until a noise caught my attention.





I pulled out my lightstaff, and shot a beam of light towards the ceiling. The creature I saw... I'll never forget.

The beast had cold hungry eyes. It had no enhancements whatsoever. Its body was completely covered in scales. Like a fish, but courser and redder. It stood up on two legs and hunched over grabbing a pipe in the ceiling. The beast's eyes narrowed when the light hit its eyes. The fish thing hissed and escaped up a tunnel.

This odd creature was heading towards the surface. I knew if I acted fast enough I could catch it before it escaped into the city.

I reached the surface just in time to see the beast climb out of the sewers. I yelled for it to stop. It looked at me for a moment, it almost seemed to comprehend. The beast began to speak in a grumbled language. Its hands and eyes glowed red. Through my etherseekers I could see swirls of energy forming around him. Inelegant, and crude. I ducked behind a nearby building. The ground shook at a large piece of the corner of the build was ripped to shreds. The air was headed to an unbearable level, and pieces of burning metal rained down on me.

When I got up some time later the creature was gone. Only the dead bodies in the sewers and the charred building were proof that it ever existed in the first place.

My requests to find the beast have so far fallen on deaf ears. The dead bodies found have been attributed to a new syndicate trying to take over the undercity. Such powerful and arcane magic could not have been created by a simple beast such as I described.

But something's coming to Esper. I can feel it. I can taste it on the winds. I'll continue to hunt the undercity. Track through the sewers. I'll find this thing and bring it to the light.

WALL OF DENIAL

BY RYAN K. (ROGUE WEAVER)

"Idra, keep the ship steady", cried Ribja, the howl of the volcanic storm muffled by the hull of the skyship.

"I'm trying", Idra snapped back, holding the steering apparatus tightly, "but the storm is too intense. We need to land."

Ribja shook his head, looking at the display in front of him. "If we land now, we might not get back to Esper at all."


Idra opened her mouth to state her case, but was cut off when the ship's alarm went off. Before either of them could react, the ship rocked wildly about, as a large eye appeared at the cockpit window.

"Dragon!", Idra shouted as she tried to set the ship right.

Ribja still stood at his station, frantically attempting to bring the ship's defenses online. Before he could, the dragon reared and sent a fireball towards the ship's engines.

Idra woke in the midst of the debris of the ship. She looked around trying to gather her wits.

"Ribja", she cried as she remembered the dragon and she hurried to what remained of the ship's navigation center. Ribja lay there, barely breathing, buried under the ruined roof. She dragged him out of the ship, and onto the wastes of Jund.



“You’re not going to die on me, not here”, she said using what little healing magic she knew to keep him alive.

Ribja woke and said “Leave me, get out, inform the seekers what we found.”

“No”, she said, “you found it, you’ll tell them.”

Before Ribja could respond, a loud yell shot through the air. On a near-by ridge, a clan of natives stood with their weapons raised, their cry still on the air. Then they began the charge.

Ribja stood up, wincing in pain as he did. “If you’re not going to leave”, he said, “ then help me fend off these savages.”

“Right”, Idra as she furrowed her brow. Light danced around them, but before the spell could take form, the Jundians were on them. Ribja held them off with bursts of wind and their warriors fell under his gales. Suddenly, fire erupted from the ground, not lava but pure fire. A shaman stood at the center of the firestorm.

“Get that shield up, now”, Ribja shouted but just as he readied another spell the fire rushed forward and rammed into Ribja, a split second before the shield took form. Idra looked down at her partner, a gaping hole in his chest, flesh and etherium, charred and melted into a bloody mess. She felt anger and rage building up at her very core.

She looked up from Ribja and saw his killer sending fire at her wall, wasting his power. She smiled at this fact, she had all the time in the world to cast one last spell.

“This is for Ribja, you senseless oafs,” she hissed as she drew on all her mana bonds, calling on every lesson of spell craft. Blue lightning flashed from her hands as she lifted

them over head and with one final yell of defiance, she let loose her spell, washing the landscape with blue light.

Idra stood on a cliff overlooking the wastes. She held in her hand the prize Ribja gave his life for: carmot. She let herself smile a little at the irony of the moment of her final spell.

“What better way to stop savages in a volcanic wasteland than with ice?”, she said out loud viewing the frozen forms to the Jund war clan. With one last look, she made her way back to Esper.



WALL OF DENIAL ART BY HOWARD LYON

WRATH

BY GOBALINKING

He arrived from nowhere, a being claiming to be their kin, though resembling them little and clad in strange, foreign materials. He spoke with a quiet purpose none of their kind had experienced, with a wisdom that belied his kind. It was for this reason the goblins of Jund found many of themselves following this mysterious wanderer, the one referring to himself only as Shift, the desert goblin.

So did they who felt subjugated to Shift's aura of confidence and leadership find themselves on a journey led by this weathered wayfinder. Though none could deny his leadership, it was curious that their leader seemed to know less of the tangled undergrowth than they did. Though most goblins found their home among the high-reaching mountain cliffs, many found themselves pressed into service finding their way through the jungles of Jund.

"Master Shift?" spoke a goblin by Shift's side, helping him clear the undergrowth as Shift hacked away with his strange weapon. It took him a moment before he responded.

"I'm not too sure how I feel about being called that...I seem to have forgotten your name."

"I am called Pork, sir."

Shift coughed a bit before grunting. "That's unfortunate."

"Master Shift," Pork continued, "where are you leading us? Are you taking us to creatures even greater than dragons we can be eaten by?"

Shift chuckled to himself, and said with a small smile, "I'm leading you to even greater things, Pork. No longer will you be honored by having creatures eat you. From this day forward, you will be honored for conquering them."

"Conquer?" Pork repeated quietly, only for the words to die upon his tongue as Shift's long blade-like staff-weapon parted the vegetation before them, looking upon what could only be described as another world.

It was a strange experience, looking upon this new vista. Much of it was similar to Jund; mountain ranges lining the sky, jungles surrounding their bases in the distance. But the swamps of ichor and sludge where nowhere to be seen, only vast meadows of fertile ground. The deep red sky of Jund was now replaced by the brighter, clearer skies of this unknown land. Jund's sky could be described only as hot; the sky here could be described only as warm.

The goblin exploration party was stunned into silence, leaving them unable to hear Shift as he muttered to himself, "Now that's interesting."

Slowly, stumbling, each goblin stepped out from the jungles beyond into this new world. It was unsettling, but invigorating to each of them. It was almost as if there was a seam in the world itself, altering their homeland in subtle ways. Shift himself bent down to the ground below him, running his fingertips through the grass and dirt, shaking the material in his hand and letting it fall through his fingers. Slowly, quietly, he smiled.

Only a sudden goblin's scream startled Shift from his thoughts.

He turned to where the noise came from, and witnessed one of his kin on the ground, nursing a wound in his arm delivered from an arrow that stuck out of his flesh. Shift scanned his eyes around the horizon, furrowing his brow.





"It is as I expected. Our world is being invaded."

The voice was quiet, but Shift's keen ears could make out the words. Before he could determine the source, another goblin cried out. They were still under attack. He'd have to be more direct.

"Hey!" he bellowed as loud as a goblin can bellow. "Show yourselves!"

There was a lull in the air for a brief moment. The sounds of footsteps against ground came from around them, as three elves left the trees to stand before the goblins, two men and one woman.

The men were clad in deep green leather armor, holding longbows in their hands, quivers at their backs. Long brown hair flowed below their shoulders alongside cloaks the same shade of green as their armor. The woman wore robes of a similar color, her arms and feet bare. Her hair, longer than that of the men, was colored in streaks; green down the center, flanked by red and white. She stared at Shift, being the goblin that spoke, with a gentle but firm anger.

"So your kind can speak. Useful to know." Her voice was tinged with a measure of distaste; one Shift was all too eager to replicate.

"Exactly. And my kind is giving you one chance to walk away."

Her mouth twitched gently, almost imperceptibly, as though trying to not be amused. She held her hands together and stared Shift down. "You forget your place, goblin. You are no longer home."

"I haven't been home for longer than I can remember now. You'll need to try a little harder to intimidate me."

Slowly, the goblins surrounding Shift began to change somehow; where they were once hunched, they now stood, strong and defiant. Where they once glanced about nervously, they now stared straight ahead, into their foe's eyes. Where they once tried to separate themselves from danger, they now felt an almost eager anticipation of the storm to come. The sheer strength of will and determination was energizing to Shift, feeling readiness where there was once apprehension, strength where there was once weakness.

"It is not by us you will be struck down," growled the elven shaman, confronting Shift. "There are powers far greater than we could ever comprehend, godly might that towers above us. Through your aggression, you prove you are unworthy."

Shift stuck the butt of his weapon into the ground beside him, arms stretched to his sides, gesturing to his small but ready force. "So you'd put your faith in beings other than yourselves? In the heat of battle, who guides your blade but your own hand? Who plans your attack but your own mind? Who keeps you in the fight but your own spirit? I have no need to comprehend the power your gods hold! I dare them to watch as we take this land, and I'd like to see what they do to stop us!"

Fists were raised and cheers were unleashed. The sheer force of Shift's heroism had finally inflamed what had been snuffed out by subservience. The voices of the goblins rang across the hills as they took up arms.

The shaman, eyes closed for this inspiring display, slowly opened them once more for them to flash with quiet anger. "This," she whispered, "is how."

She rose her arms to the sky as the clouds themselves began to swirl and storm. Without a sound, they opened, almost as a portal to another dimension entirely, and from this

portal came a sudden blast of sound and flame. Energy both foreign and familiar lashed from the sky, tendrils of force curling into one concentrated blast of power, and in a flash, enveloped Shift completely.

If asked, the goblins could never explain what this power was. It was strange and indescribable, a force they or their ancestors had never witnessed in their lifetimes. They could only comprehend the grisly silhouette of their master, screaming.



INTIMIDATION BOLT ART BY MICHAEL BRUINSMA

GOBLIN SONG

BY SKIBO

Come along my goblin kin,
And follow me out there.
The mountains here are dragonless,
For the humans laid them bare.
We have to find a new way,
To die as goblins should,
So we'll trek into the great unknown,
From fields to thickest wood.

We'll get eaten by behemoths,
Pecked apart by birds of prey.
The road ahead is tricky,
But we we'll surely find a way.

In the distant land of Naya
We can be crushed flat under-heel.
And on the fields of noble Bant,
They'll run you through with steel.
I hear in Grixis they love to kill,
With bone shards you'll be skewer.
And the Esperites will kill you nice,
And dump you in the sewer.

We'll get torn apart by angels
Or plowbeasts left to stray.
The road ahead is difficult,



But we'll surely find a way.

We shall climb the highest mountains,

And delve the deepest murk.

We'll brave the harshest landscapes,

Never mind the work.

And when it's time to perish,

And meet our bitter end,

Your death will be magnificent,

Such as poets never penned.

We'll die by Sphinx's riddles,

Or in a magic fray,

The road ahead is full of choice

We'll surely find a way.





CHAPTER 3:

SHARDS AT WAR

SIEGE

BY MERCER

Marix realized she was going into shock when she kept trying to connect the mana tuners with her missing hand. She had, by her estimation, spent four minutes trying to manipulate an appendage that no longer existed... not growing more frustrated by the inability of trying to make the connection, merely maintaining a dull sense that it had to get connected.

This isn't working, she thought slowly, as though her thoughts were made of mud. She focused her thoughts enough to remember an intelligence-boosting spell... the effects while mentally impaired could be dangerous, yes, but it was the only thing she could do. Psychological impairment was no an option at the moment.

Her thoughts smoothed out, her faculties returned to her. Her mental processes once again flowed easily.

She looked at the clock (a sheet of magically-resonant crystal that could tell time even through chonal distortions in the lab) and cursed. She'd been uselessly waving her etherium stump and casting the cognition spell for almost ten minutes.

She blew strands of her long, black hair out of her face and turned back to the machine. Still unaccustomed to the razor-edged wrist where her left hand used to be, she was clumsy as she connected the sapphire-tipped wire to the intricate artifact.

"Are you almost done?" a nearly mechanical voice said behind her.

As she turned the appropriate dial and mentally recited the proper incantation to start the machine, she replied, "Done."

The vedalken raised her eyes in shock as Marix turned around. "What happened to your hand?"


"One of those... things got a hold of me. Something very big and very, very dead." She walked past Iritha with purpose towards the entrance of the lab. "Deader now, I suppose. Is everyone else upstairs?"

"Everyone who's still alive. I mean... you know what I mean," Iritha replied, their filigree footsteps creating a hollow but musical echo across the floor. "We've sealed off everything above this"

Iritha was interrupted by a blur of something moving out from behind one of the numerous pipes and pylons in the hallway and slamming into the vedalken with enough force to shake the floor. They got to the lab already? thought Marix, spinning around to face the threat.



KEDEREKT PARASITE ART BY DAN SCOTT



The monster was bigger than either of them, a pastiche of dead, necrotic flesh held together by fused bone. All claws and entangled limbs, it overpowered Iritha and started spewing a green venom from what might have been a face. Iritha, never one to display emotion, was clearly resisting the urge to scream as the agent began eating into her face and etherium.

Marix spoke a quick incantation and traced the appropriate sigils in the air. As she finished, parts of the wall itself leapt to remove the horror from the vedalken and pull it into a metallic embrace.

"Are you okay?" asked the human, helping her wounded friend to her feet.

"No... that... creature attacked me with some sort of biological agent. I believe I will succumb before long. No matter. We don't have much time."

"How long before the fifth wind dies down?"

"Approximately twenty minutes."

"Eighth wind?"

"Won't rise for another three days."

"Even if we get to the central hall in the next twenty minutes, will this work? Teleportation's never been my strong suit, certainly not with half the tower coming along..."

"It will have to. The seals on the doors will not stop the dead flesh of these creatures for long."

The two longtime rivals and suddenly necessary teammates cast a ward spell on the lab door (using the last of Iritha's personal supply of mana), and then they began to run. Down one hall, turn and down the next. As they went, the sigils on the mana conductors strung through the entire facility began to brighten and hum.

Down the next corridor, and into the entrance of the floor's main foyer, a grand vision of polished metal and architectural beauty. Marix's heart sank.

Dozens of enemies stood in the foyer, most of them freshly killed academy students. The undead uniformly turned to look at them, their eyes hungry with the anticipation of a fresh meal.

Marix slammed the door, trying not to shout even as panic began to set in, "No good. South corridor."


"I just came from ther--Ah!" Iritha started as dozens of hungry hands slammed on and scraped against the closed door. The two women turned and ran. "South corridor's completely jammed with them. I suspect the only way to the central hall now is through the tenth floor."

"Everything below this floor is completely infested, Iritha!"

"Do you have a better idea?"

There was a long pause before Marix answered.





Marix was shocked when the headless form of the head artificer began trying to claw at her.

The woman pierced the heart of the fat corpse with the torn etherium of her left arm. He was bigger than she was, but it allowed her to pin him against the wall for a few precious seconds.

"Iritha, grab the scroll!"

She found the scroll she was looking for, an unspeakably ancient piece of parchment pulled from a tower that had appeared in the ocean as mysteriously as these monsters had appeared in the town. As Marix shoved the former artificer off of her arm with a solid kick, the vedalken spared a moment to look at the human. "I still fail to see the point of this."

"Hunches and intuition have always failed you," Marix shot back as the pair escaped from the office, the headless body trying to find its way to them.

"The Tower Scrolls talk about forms of magic that interact with other forms of magic."

"Neither of which exist, I would remind you." Iritha's pace slowed as the infection of flesh and etherium began to reach her joints.

"They might. The Vectis searchers found that scroll weeks ago, and it talks about these monsters." Marix paused to muscle open the hallway door in front of them. She could hear the scrabbling of dozens of etherium limbs, their tuneless echoes reverberating through the hall.

And approaching.

"It speaks of how to destroy them, correct? I still fail to see what good it would do us. The scroll requires a color of mana that does not exist."

"It speaks of biomana as a contrast to necromana. We're throat-deep in necromana right now. And if it predicted this form of black magic, I'm willing to bet the biomana exists too." Marix took Iritha's arm and picked up speed as she approached Storeroom E.

"None of that matters if we can't utilize it."

"You don't remember the sphere?"

The scraping grew louder.

"Oh, yes. The sphere. We thought Marmic's calculations were fundamentally flawed, but perhaps they were prescient."

"Exactly. I hope the thing works."

"It never drew the appropriate forms of mana before it spent decades in stor... age..."

The conversation ended. In the center of the hall stood the door to Storeroom E, where it had been home to Marmic's sphere for nearly thirty years. On the opposite end of the hallway, a horde of former students and researchers, many of which were barely holding together from the wounds that killed them, rushed toward them with hands outstretched.

"Go. I'll hold them off."

Marix nodded stoically.

The two vitals began running; Iritha towards the horde and Marix towards the door. Iritha, even slowed by the infection, began drawing power from the mana conductors to cast one final spell. Marix got to the door and managed to get inside, even as her dead cousin, showing none of her former humanity, barely missed hitting her in the face with a wild grab.

She slammed the door shut and uttered the command word that shut the locks.

Please let me have the time. Please. There are so many people I can still save.

Marix found the sphere, covered in a semimetallic fabric. She tossed the covering aside. The machine was still intact. She looked for the sigils she needed to infuse with mana as she considered what she had just done. She mentally asked--somebody? nobody?--for help. She wondered where she'd gotten the idea for that.



MASTER TRANSMUTER ART BY CHIPPY

She found the inscription at the base and infused it with blue mana. Five glowing globes on the multi-ringed sphere ignited into five different colors. Each sat upon a separate steel ring that began to rotate, each going in a different direction and each beginning to spin.

The sounds of battle died down outside, punctuated by a heartbreaking female scream. Marix didn't let herself become distracted. Drawing mana from the conductors out in the hall, Marix focused it into the emerald globe.

The silence was broken by the sound of something slamming the door, the metal buckling under the impact.

Marix studied the scroll under the light of the device.

Another impact. A thousand little scrapes emanated from the door, dead wizards and artificers turning their attention to the living still inside.

She concentrated, mentally preparing the incantation.

Another impact, the door straining under dozens of walking corpses.

She felt an entirely new sensation of energy take root in her heart.

The door broke open as she began speaking the words.



REVEN'S NEW FLESH

BY SKIBO

Fanfare rung out across town. Reven the Besigiled had returned from his quest into the glimmering new lands. He had taken his trustiest cohorts, his finest steed, and his sharpest blades.

He returned alone, without a horse. He carried with him only one sword. He wore no armor. The townsefolk gathered in the town center. They gasped as they saw what remained of their hero.

His arms that once wrestled a wild leotau to the ground now glimmered in the sun.

His legs that won every annual race were hollow.

Reven's face, that once showed youthful vigor, had turned cold.

The man known as the hero of Lockhart had returned from his trip completely changed.

Reven clenched his metal fists and waited for the lord's guard to receive him.

Lore Constance strolled through the crowd with all the rush of a light breeze. The old man had served three generations of Lords and still wielded the deadliest blade in the region. But the years had taken away his lust for battle, and the old man spent much of his time maintaining the gardens at the castle.

Constance came to the center and stopped. He looked over Reven. "What is this?"

"Tell the Lord of my return. I would like a council with him"

"Only honorable knights of the lord can request his presence. All I see here is a traitor to tradition."

Reven took a step forward. The crowd hushed and moved back. "I am as always a loyal servant of the lord. You will let me speak with him at once."

Constance stood his ground. "You have abandoned the way of the knight Reven, who you serve no longer matters. You've defiled your body and forsaken your allies and steed." Constance reached out, grabbed the most prominent sigil Reven wore, and pulled it off. "You are no longer worthy of wearing the lord's sigil."

Constance turned around and began to walk away, "I'll tell the lord you fell in combat. I don't think his heart could bear knowing what you've become."

Reven flashed with anger, "If I have fallen so far, fight me. Show me how great the traditions are."


Constance stopped but didn't turn around, "Fine, we'll meet here at high noon. And I'll show you just what you've forsaken."

At noon the two met. Reven stood tall. Constance began the ritual of putting on his armor. He blessed his blade, and stood at the ready. Raven unsheathed his blade. Like his arms and legs, his sword was hollow with filigree work.

"No armor?" Constance said.

Reven lifted his shirt exposing the etherium enhancements beneath, "I'm always wearing my armor."





Constance raised his sword, "Without the rituals of donning, how is your armor going to protect you?"

Reven lifted his shirt exposing the etherium enhancements beneath, "I'm already wearing it."

Steel sparked with steel. Constance parried Reven easily, and countered all Reven's attacks. Reven punched Constance in the stomach. His enhanced crushed the old man's breastplate. Constance fell to his knees. Reven moved swiftly and plunged his blade into Constance's exposed back. The blade punctured the front of the armor.

Reven pulled his blade out and wiped it off. "Clinging to your old ways has gotten you killed old man."

The crowd was silent. For the first time, they saw Reven not as a hero, but as a monster.

Reven looked down at his etherium hand. His eyes were open to the horrors of the world. But these people were still blind. They still saw their way as the only way.

In the center of his own village, at the heart of his home plane, Reven was truly alone.

Reven felt a great pain in his heart as he saddled his horse. Everything he loved about Bant would doom it to destruction. He paused for a moment before riding out of Lockhart, "Tell the lord Reven the besigiled died in Esper... in a way, I did."

GRIXIS PLUNDER

BY FEAROFTHEDARK

Though she could not see the source, Taylana heard the slow, meticulous dripping echoing of some unknown liquid through the large open cathedral. Despite all that she had been through, she always said she was blessed by Gorael for the etherium enhancements made to her ears. She didn't care that the majority of her body had been transformed as well, but without the adjustments to her ears, Taylana would have probably died many years ago. As she told countless other Agents, it was better to hear an enemy and know when to sneak off, then to have to think you were stronger than him and fight.

She crept through the shadows, leaping from one pool of darkness to another. Her body was camouflaged well to the surroundings, and she wondered if it was Gorael's blessing that allowed this new world to be so easy for her to manipulate. She had seen others who had not adjusted so well.

Pausing once again, she looked up at the large, domed ceiling and felt like she was inside the belly of a large creature, like the leviathans that some had claimed to have seen. Perhaps this had once been a glorious cathedral, but now the building was nothing more than a shelter from the random lightning that would occasionally snake across the sky. The walls were covered in a dark black mold, and when Taylana had first crept into the cathedral, she had noticed how it smelled like decay. She was thankful that she was able to turn off her sense of smell before continuing on.

The sound of the dripping seemed to be growing louder, and Taylana scanned the rafters above her for the sound. Perhaps it wasn't an important detail, but one never knew when something would be of importance in the future. Her eyes zoomed in and out as



she focused on the mold on the walls. Depending on the sources of light, her eyes would adjust to and from night vision in an involuntary motion.

It only took her a moment to find what it was: a small, furry corpse of a creature never seen in Esper. It looked almost rodent-like, with its head twisted off its spine and only hanging by a small flap of skin. It was hanging upside down by the ankles (there seemed to be some crude metal spikes keeping it hanging against the wall), and the blood seemed to be flowing out of its neck ever so slowly. Taylana tilted her head like a confused animal, studying the dead creature, before waving her hand in a satirical blessing and moving on.

She moved out of the open entryway of the cathedral into a long narrow corridor. She switched on her scent glands and noted that the amount of decay here was stronger than in the entryway. Off in the distance, she could hear something shuffling around, as if it was moving slowly, whatever it was doing.

Unsheathing her dagger from her back, she pushed it gently into the wall and climbed up, her legs and arms pushing against both sides of the narrow corridor, allowing her to scuttle across the ceiling as needed. It was even darker as she moved through the corridor, but it mattered little thanks to her night vision. The corridor twisted and turned, like an ancient serpent, yet the slow shuffling seemed to grow louder and louder.

She finally came to an open room, with a ceiling much higher than the corridor had been. She dropped to the floor in a silent fall, and after brushing her thick black hair out of her face, she looked up to see the source of the shuffling.

It was a large, bloated zombie hybrid. It was composed of numerous parts from other organisms. She noted about thirteen different creatures assembled into one. The creature was so large it could only shuffle slowly around in the darkness. It made long, drawn out sniffs, which Taylana deduced had to do with scent, since the creature had no eyes. Her master had given her warning as to why he had hired her for this job.

"The creatures in this new world seem to thrive off the living. You of all the Agents have repressed that scent well."

Gorael's favor upon her, she darted from the corridor entryway past the hybrid, into the next room, a small chamber containing a scepter the size of her forearm upon it. The scepter twisted, much like the etherium that made up her arms and legs. It had been stolen in a skirmish a few weeks back. It was now hers to return. Her eyes scanned for magical wards, and, after finding none, gently lifted the scepter from the floor. A rush of knowledge took her mind, and she heard a voice that was not hers inside her head.

Run.

No sooner than she had turned and started moving, the chamber floor began rumbling, and numerous remains surfaced, covered in an unholy, dark fire. Switching on her scent glands, Taylana sprinted, knowing her dagger would be of no avail, and that only her wits and enhanced senses could save her. The air smelled like smoldering flesh. The hybrid creature roared at her as she ran past it, and Taylana realized that the burning bodies must have somehow alerted the creature to her presence. She nimbly somersaulted between the massive legs of the creature, and found herself in the narrow corridor which she had originally navigated. The mold seemed to be moving against her, trying to suffocate her and hold her for the captors that pursued her. She slashed at the darkness encompassing her, clearing her way until she found her way into the open entrance of the rotted cathedral. Still clutching the scepter in her hand, she ran out past the entryway, the open sky erupting in a burst of violet electricity.

She held the scepter aloft as she had been instructed to do, and in a quick moment she saw him, the vedalken knight atop an enormous gargoyle flying towards her. She felt a small wave of disgust that they would send a vedalken, especially since they knew of her appreciation of Gorael and his beliefs. The smell of charred flesh reached her nostrils, and she turned to see the flaming remains exiting from the corridor. Taylana sprinted towards



the gargoyle as it swooped lower, until it was low enough that she could leap onto its back. The vedalken turned his mount around, and they flew away from the dead place, back into the calm skies of Esper.

Tidehollow was a familiar haunt to Taylana, though she was uncertain if it was such a place for somebody as honorable as the messenger. He was cloaked and hooded so that it was impossible to see his face.

"You have done well Disciple of Gorael," the hooded figure whispered.

"Thank you Lord," Taylana replied. "I have returned with the Scepter." She held out the object to her contractor, who took it and exchanged it with a large sack of currency.

"I will tell Voln what you have done. He sends his thanks."

The hooded figure turned and walked away, back to the sculler who would take him back to the upper cities. Taylana weighed the sack of currency in her hand. Times were changing, but business was good.



VECTIS AGENTS ART BY CHIPPY

SHEEP'S CLOTHING

BY HEYRA666

The old priest was cleaning the doorstep of the temple when the man in blue dismounted his horse. He squinted a bit to see past the glaring sun, and a smile lit his face when he recognized his guest. "Gwafa Hazid, as I live and breathe! Old friend, it's been too long," he called out jovially.

The young man smiled and called back, "I was heading through to Jhess Keep when I spotted the temple. I thought I'd drop in around noonday for a bit of lunch," said the man, with a quieter smile than his friend. "What do you say?"

"I say come in! We haven't talked in ages." As the two men walked through the golden gilded doors to the waiting feast, Hazid turned and tossed a rather large coin to the squire and winked playfully. The squire fumbled the coin, letting it land amid the arid dust that clouded the road. The boy scrabbled in the dirt for his payment, stammering his thanks and assuring the blue-clad noble that his horse would be well taken care of.

"So what have you been up to since you graduated from my tutelage, you young rascal?" asked the priest, tearing into a glistening piece of meat with his knife.

"Well I'm certainly well off, if that's what you mean."

"I gathered that from the feast your chef provided. So there's no chance to lure you back to the priestly life, then?"

Hazid gave a little chuckle. "I'm afraid not. Say, have you thought about bringing on an apprentice to take over after you're gone? You are getting a bit on in years, after all."



"Funny you should bring that up," said the priest, in between bites. "Jon, come here for a minute and meet an old friend of mine." A young boy approached, dressed in the garb of a novice. As he entered the room, he made no effort to conceal his amazement at Hazid's finery, a sharp contrast to his own plain white robe. Hazid took no time dancing around the issue.

"You have a good eye for silks, Jon. Perhaps you'd like some of your own?" The boy's eyes widened quickly.

"Now, now, you know that luxuries are forbidden to us," said the old man quickly, clearly ill-at-ease with the direction the conversation was going. "Jon, why don't you run along and practice your rites?" The boy nodded absently, backing out of the room while darting furtive glances at the stranger's clothing. When his footsteps faded from hearing, the priest turned back to Hazid, a slight frown on his face. "Alright, no more beating around the bush. What exactly are you playing at?"



Hazid looked shocked. "Why, you offend me. Can't I just drop by and see an old friend every now and then." His look of surprise was quickly replaced by a sly smile. "Of course, now that you mention it, I do have something I'd like to talk to you about."

The old priest chuckled a bit. "It was always like this with you. What is it this time?"

"Now, now." Hazid's grin was plain in his voice. "A simple proposal, all in good time. First let me ask you something. Take a look around you. What do you see?"

The priest gave Hazid a questioning look. "I see a holy place."

"Exactly. But doesn't a holy place deserve more than a leaky roof and patched up walls? Doesn't a holy place deserve more than a single priest and a single apprentice. Shouldn't it be a noble establishment, one to be the envy of all the temples nearby?"

A small frown formed on the priest's face. "Watch your words, old friend. The angels frown on pride. But I will admit that the place could use some help. We aren't bringing in the number of worshippers we need anymore. I had to travel to five towns until I found a couple willing to give me their son as an apprentice. The war is taking its toll on the faith of the people." The old man buried his head in his hands. "I just don't know what I'm going to do," he murmured.

Hazid put a hand on his friend's shoulders. "I can help you."

The other man turned towards him. "No. No charity from you. I couldn't live with myself."

"This wouldn't be charity. You'd be doing something for me, as well."

The priest raised an eyebrow. "And what might that be?"

"The war is affecting us all, including the higher-ups in Jhess. Right now, they need to win the hearts and minds of the populace. They need dedicated soldiers, willing to fight to their last breath. But the people are suspicious these days. They speak of corruption and bribery within the government. They need someone to reassure them, someone with the trust of the angels."

"You're asking me to spread propaganda? To preach war?" asked the priest, an bit of anger creeping into his eyes.

Hazid put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "Don't you want to help spread the glory of Jhess? And don't forget that the money you'll receive will allow you to build a temple truly worthy of the angels' greatness. The populace will be happy, the angels will be happy, and you'll be happy. Everyone wins."

The priest did nothing but stare at him for a short while, a tired look on his face. Then he turned away from Hazid and walked wearily to the door. "I need to think about this," he muttered. "Wait for me here, please."



The priest's face was a steel mask when he returned to the small kitchen. Hazid was sitting by the table chatting idly to Jon, tousling his hair every now and then. Hazid turned to him, gently shoos the young student out of the way. "Your answer?" he asked.

"No. You've changed, Gwafa changed for the worse. You ask me to send young men to die. The angels do not wish for wars of this kind, struggles between petty orders, a shade of the noble battles of dignity we waged in the past. And yet you speak of this as if it was

something to be proud of. I will not spit on Asha's teachings for the sake of glory or wealth. Now I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave this temple."

Hazid pulled himself up with a sigh and a shake of the head. "I wish you had chosen differently."

The priest suddenly felt an explosion of pain behind his eyes, followed by a sudden dizziness and a warm wetness dripping down the back of his neck. But before he could recover, another blow was struck, and another, forcing the priest down to his knees. And as he lay on the ground, unable to speak or move, Hazid looked down at him and said, "Most everyone has a price, old friend. Holy men are no exception." Then the priest's skull was caved in with a sickening crunch.

The young apprentice dropped the bloodstained stone on the dusty floor, eyes wide. Hazid strolled over to him and placed a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder. "Now Jon, let's have a talk about your new temple."



GWAF HAZID, PROFITEER ART BY TODD LOCKWOOD

THE INVADERS

BY TEVISH SZAT

Vithia has always been under siege. Armies have crashed against us, and each time we have fought them off, though we have always recovered diminished rather than whole, but that is the way of the world, and we few vitals can do only so much to preserve our land and our vis from the invaders that come to our doorsteps, seeking to steal at least one and most often both from us. But these days there are new invaders, the likes of which I have never seen from Vithia's walls. These invaders are not necromancers, nor undead, nor even demons. We don't know what they are or where they come from, but their strange shapes leave me more afraid than I have been in my life. Even the banewasp swarms are nothing compared to these creatures, these hideous things from afar.

Their raiments are the color of long-bleached bone, for those that are not entirely of steel. Though they take the shape of humans I can scarce believe that they are, for I have never in my life seen a human of their like. Their alien magic strikes our walls and our defenders down, raining in such colors... bright flashes of bone, lingering glows in the sallow color of oozing pus. I look outside and see then come closer each day, and each night sleep fearing that we cannot win this war.



We've been trekking through Grixis for far too long, and I think it's beginning to wear on Jharic, perhaps worse than on the rest of us. Yesterday we came on another necropolis, but something struck me as different about it. The creatures that fought in its defense were unlike most of the beasts we have found throughout this land, their blood red and their manner disturbingly human. I suspect some unique manner of reanimation was used in their creation that let them keep more of what had in life, for they are assuredly no demons, as are the other living creatures we have found.

While our attack was repelled, Jharic wanted to pull on. She was... a sight to be seen for certain, white and golden magi flaring about him and about the enemy. I believe that we may be able to break the ranks of the enemy soon, if not tomorrow than perhaps the day after, and certainly soon enough if nothing changes behind those walls, but I wonder at times of the cost to ourselves, not in men but to our souls. Even if we win this war, we could lose ourselves in it.



These foreign creatures are relentless as they come for us... I think the ones covered in steel must be some sort of machine, like the ones that came months ago. Those ones left as soon as they came. They did not come to the walls and did not bother us here, just walked through the distance. Perhaps those were scouts for the army that we see before us now? That musing will not do us much good now. It doesn't matter where these things came from, only that they do not seem to care to leave us be. They have mages among them, this we know for certain, for the burns on those soldiers we recovered from the front could have been made by nothing else.

One thing troubles me though... If these are some new sort of necromancer, a devilry we have not been introduced to, why do they not take the vis and the bodies of those they kill? They leave everything rotting on the field, wasteful, as though they don't care about the resources, or anything. If they don't care, why are they attacking us, and why won't they leave? I don't know, and I'm afraid they're something even more terrible from the necromancers. One man who came back from the fight, injured but not dead, recounted what looked like their commander, howling with glee as he through that bone-white light that seared and destroyed all it touched. I don't know if we'll see another night, for none of the old strategies are working against these invaders.



I don't know if any of us will be able to see Bant again. We came here looking for victory, looking for sigils, looking for honor, but when we leave here, if Jharic is any indication, we shall be worthy of none. I am sure that if we return alive such honor will be bestowed, but we will not have earned it. Our soldiers strike against their enemies first, like cravens in the night, and recite the Prayer of Asha after the fighting, if at all. Each one of them now more or less acts like the same things they fight, brutal and monstrous in greater or lesser degree. I would relieve Jharic of her command for all I have seen, shrieking like a wild animal with fury and... even joy as she destroyed them, but that I fear the only way that we will survive this war is to become what we hate.

One thing bothers me, however... These monsters we fight are so much like humans that it is hard to believe that they are anything else. They fight like intelligent people, but having seen the liches and zombies of this place I know that even a rotting corpse may be cunning. Their eyes though... their eyes look alive and their screams are the same as ours. Are they merely meant to sap our wills to fight as the others would have me believe, or is there something else at work? Whatever the case, I cannot allow myself to be bothered by it while we fight for our lives and our home in a foreign land. Like the soldiers who strike first and pray later, I must lay these nagging thoughts aside.



GLORY OF WARFARE ART BY PARENTE

I don't know why I'm still alive. For all that has happened, I ought to be dead and rotting on the dregscape like so many others, left to expire and their vis dissolve into the undying soil of Grixis. But I escaped and I'm still alive. I can't forget what I saw there, though, when the walls came crumbling down in showers of those pus-colored lights of magic... The enemy we were fighting... These invaders were not undead, or machines, or any other alien thing that I should have guessed. They were vitals. I have never seen vitals like them, and I don't want to see such ever again. They came to do nothing but destroy us, tear us asunder and leave us to rot, even when we could perhaps have fought together against the necromancers...

These invaders, these vitals are the worst monsters that I have ever seen, worse than the demons and the necromancers because they're like us. The stronghold is lost and I don't know how long we'll survive outside of it, whether we'll reach the next safe place, or get caught by any of the thousand dangers of our home, or gods forbid the vital invaders that came for us. We'll try though. We always try to make it, and that's why there are any vitals left at all.

If those invaders are what we'd have to be like to survive though, I'm not sure if I'd want to.



That unholy fury I have seen in our enemies countless times I now see among our own, as the men act like monsters in the ruins of this cursed place. I don't want to tell them what I've noticed, what I saw in the fighting. These things... They weren't things at all, but people afraid for their lives, which we robbed them of. We're disgraces to our sigils and our homeland. I think Jharic noticed as well, or else is now worse for the wear, for while she is not fighting she just sits and stares into the firelight, as though haunted by the ghosts of those she gleefully laid in their graves.

Am I any better? I don't think so. I killed alongside all the others, even when I suspected, even when I could have done something to stop us. I did not. I wanted to defeat our enemies as surely as any soldier, as surely as Jharic or any of the others. And yet... I know that I for one cannot return home. There is blood on my hands that will never be wiped clean, a shame I can still feel that no amount of good deeds, no battles against demons, will assuage. If I do not fall, I shall remain in the darkness, rather than returning to the light we've turned our back on. Perhaps others will follow my path, but I cannot let myself hope for it, hold out for it. I can only hope the Angels see the darkness in their hearts and if they cannot heal it, see retribution made.

War has always been an easy thing. It is now, that it becomes free of law and guilt alike, that it turns us into monsters.



ZEALOUS PERSECUTION ART BY CHRISTOPHER MOELLER



CHAPTER 4:

SHATTERED NO MORE

METAL LOVE

BY SKIBO

Major Vectus peered through his binoculars. The world was changing daily. More of his world was merging with more of another world. A world of castles and knights. Of weak flesh.

Vectus twiddled his filigree fingers. He heard a loud noise and turned around. His daughter was picking up some food she had dropped. "What are you up to honey?"

The young girl picked up the food, "Oh just getting a snack. How's it going with you." Vectus turned to the window and peered across to the gleaming castle in the distance. "Not well. We are evenly matched."

Amour Vectus was a lonely girl. She stayed inside, and spoke to few. She came to the basement storage area. Opened a door to the linen closet and walked in. This area was forgotten by most.

Amour put the food on a shelf and walked to the back of the room. She removed a pile of clothing to reveal a young man.

The boy was no older than her. His hair was untamed, a farmer's son perhaps. She had learned about farmers studying the information gathered by her father. His flesh was untouched by metal. And despite this fact, he was healing quickly.

It was curious. The idea of etherium was to improve the physical form, and yet this boy's form was perfect. She smiled. The boy hadn't regained consciousness since she found him.



The sudden emergence of the castle and surrounding land created havoc on the metallic landscape. Water from the green pastures flowed onto Esper. The water sought out the easiest path and created something Amour had never seen. A was natural stream. It wasn't engineered, it wasn't redirected to increase efficiency, it simply was.

Amour came to the river every day. She just sat for hours watching the crystal waters. One day, when sitting she spotted a body. It was a boy. He was bleeding, and battered. He must have been caught in the recent battle.

Her father told her to pity the castle dwellers. That they were imperfect. That they were ignorant.

She brought the boy to her father's outpost and hid him under a pile of linens.



Vectus scowled. He had lost a lot of men the previous day. To many. A guard popped into the room. "Major Vectus, may I have a word?" the major waved the guard to continue. "One of my guards has observed your daughter enter a storage area. We thought you would like to know."

Vectus thought for a moment. "Search it."



Amour came to the closet to find it in disarray. It had been searched. She rushed to the back, and tore through the pile of linens. She found no one. She screamed.

Vectus stared out blankly. He ground his teeth.

Amour entered in a huff. "You had no right."



"I had every right. You bring an enemy into my outpost. I told you, no pets."

"He's a person dad. A living, breathing person. He not an animal, and he not a savage."

"I know," Vectus smiled. "I made him acceptable."

"Oh, no you didn't. You didn't."

"As we speak he's getting his first infusion of etherium. His wounds will be healed, and his body will be perfected. In a few weeks he'll be fit for life in the outpost."



Amour wept for weeks. Vectus couldn't stand emotions. And that's all that his daughter seemed to be filled with these days. Each day more and more grass sprouted up. Trees and houses, barns and cattle rose up. Amour just sat at her window and looked out.

She saw a cart come down the road driven by a young man. She recognized that face anywhere, it was the face of the boy she kept. She ran down the stairs to meet him at the cart. His face was untouched by etherium enhancement. The boy stood up.

"Are you Amour?" He asked. His voice more beautiful than she ever imagined. Amour nodded.

He smiled, "They tell me that you're the one I should thank for saving me."

She smiled.

BIRTH OF A HERO

BY NO ONE'S PUPPET


Death was never something that Taric had truly feared. In the past, all discretions were solved through single person combat. Each side of the field would be full of cheering knights rallying around their champion, empowering him with arcane magics of glory and hope. Now however, as he lay on the battlefield bleeding from under his chain mail, he realized how much he had lived in a fairytale world.

These were not people of honor, or even lowly thieves he was fighting. These were the spawns of evil, brought to life with hatred flowing through their veins. Their sole purpose in life, or unlife as it may be, was to kill for their master, and kill without mercy. Taric had seen these horrors rip through bone and sinew, and feast upon their lifeblood as it drained from their bodies. Their faces were visages of absolute torment, and pain. His own neighbors he saw die before him, when not even a year ago they had spent a warm summer's evening enjoying a feast with each others families. Now they were just another meal for the demonic creatures of Grixis.

Something suddenly stirred next to him. A putrid skeletal form slowly started to rise from the fallen bodies around him. What sorcery was this that reanimated the already dead? What unholy acts of blasphemy did this creature perform in order to overcome the limitations of life? As it extended its hand down to a fallen weapon, pieces of its flesh fell to the earth and infected the ground where they landed. It hauled to its shoulders a long, chipped and rusted scythe, attached to a blackened bone of some long dead demon. At the sight of this Taric gasped in surprise and shock, which drew the attention of the zombie. As it shambled closer, now hefting its deadly weapon into a position with more leverage, Taric began to contemplate death once more.

When it seemed like the end was truly near, and he could feel the cold hands of death grasping him by the neck, the world stopped. The zombie held fast, as if frozen in time.





The battle around him slowed and halted. The only thing with any free will of motion seemed to be him. As he gazed at the sight around him, a soft voice spoke into his ear.

"Do not fear, you are safe for now."

"Where am I, what limbo is this?" said Taric.

"This is no limbo, faithful warrior. I have merely slowed time to allow this meeting to occur. Your nation needs you, as do your brothers in arms. Will you stand to protect them?"

"I would if not for my condition. I've been wounded beyond repair. I could feel the icy grip of death on my mere moments ago," explain Taric.

"Do not fear, you shall be healed, but in return you must use your renewed life to do the bidding of the angels. Will you accept my blessing?"

"For Bant I would gladly give a thousand lives. I accept your blessing."

With that a heavenly figure descended from the clouds. She glided down gently upon wings of pure ivory and landed in front of his splayed body. She slowly bent down and leaned in over his forehead and gently placed a kiss upon him. Instantly he felt his wound staunch and heal. Blood once again flowed to his limbs and heart. He felt his strength return and flexed his muscles to test their capabilities.

"Before you go noble warrior, allow me to grant you one last gift in the hopes that Bant will survive."

With a wave of her hand he felt something fall gently around his shoulders. Looking at his back he was amazed to see two heavenly wings extending out of his back. His sword also glowed with an unearthly light.

“Go forth and slay the enemies of Bant, you have Asha’s blessing and mine.”

With that she was gone leaving behind only an ivory feather. Around him the world sprang to life again. The sound of battle around him returned and more bodies from both sides of the battle fell. The zombie before him stood with weapon raised, muscles bulging as it begun his swing. But before the scythe reached the apex of its swing, the zombie found a blade lodged deep within its chest. The purified steel struck home and the zombie’s spine was severed in two. It crashed to the ground in a heap; its flesh falling away, and its bones crumbling to ash. With a flutter of his wings he took to the sky. A new hero had been born on Bant, and with his new life and strength Taric would do all in his power to rid his home of the vile Grixians.



ASHA’S FAVOR ART BY DONATO GIANCOLA

FATES ENTWINED

BY SKIBO

Fire blazed to life inside the cramped space. Venndi screamed. She almost lost concentration on her protection spell. Without it, the massive weight that surrounded her would crush in.

Besides Venndi, the protective bubble was also occupied by a ragged man named Jourak. The odd man with braids in his hair held the fire in his hand.

"Only agents of Malfegor can produce fire so readily," Venndi said shaking, "And only his agents could hold it in their hands."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I was just on a life hunt when my tribe ran into yours. If you would prefer I'll extinguish my flame."

"No..." Venndi rubbed her sigil, and kept her other hand on her dagger. "I need the light to concentrate." She shifted back to the edge of the protective bubble. "Just stay on your side."

Jourak poked at the edges of the bubble. The barrier flashed white when he prodded it.

"What manner of sorcery is this?"

"It's a simple protective spell. It's meant to catch arrows, but it seems to be holding up fine here. Hopefully it will hold out until my comrades can get me out of here." She ran her hands along her dagger.

Jourak smirked, "Your tribe is probably crushed dead, just like we're going to be."

"They're not my tribe", Venndi retorted "They're my army. And they'll get me out."



Time passed. The bubble was stifling with the heat created by the fire. Jourak shook his waterskin, it was empty. Venndi pulled a red fruit from her pack and threw it to Jourak. "I want you to know, I don't intend to die here. And your fire is helping me keep us alive."

Jourak looked over the fruit. "Sure, we can't live civilly, but we can die civilly."
Jourak ate the fruit in a few bites.

"Are you human," Venndi looked over Jourak, "Or are you some sort of demon?"

"I'm as human as you." Jourak ran his callous fingers through the flames. He showed his unburned fingers, "I've just been survived worse."



JUND BATTLEMAGE ART BY VANCE KOVACS

Venndi examined the fire from a distance, "How can it burn without fuel?"

Jourak clenched his fists squeezing the fire out from either side. "It's simple survival magic... any child can do it." Jourak smirked.

"Simple!" Venndi said, "I've been in hundreds of battles, and I've never seen magic like this."

Jourak shifted uncomfortably in his corner, "I'd say its fair turnabout. This magic is something I've never seen."

Venndi explained, "I've trained long and hard to perfect it. Arrows and blades can't pierce it."

Jourak slunk back into a sleeping position, "That's the difference I guess. Where I'm from, if faced with arrows you just take the hit and cut down the archer before he can reload."



The sun must have set because Jourak had fallen asleep. The Sigil Venndi wore kept her from feeling tired or hungry. Venndi lit a torch and for the first time, since this whole ordeal began, she felt relaxed. The unfamiliar magic had ceased, and she was alone with her thoughts.

She rubbed the handle of her dagger. Jourak was a tough man. He was a born fighter. But Venndi was sure she could slit his throat before he could react. She checked her torches. She had three left. Each would burn for eight hours. Together they would give her over a day of light. If her men couldn't get her out by then... they weren't going to at all.

The soldier of Bant pulled her dagger out of its sheath. One quick motion, and he would be dead. She shifted it in her hand. He'd barely feel it, she told herself...

she stopped

Why do I care if he'd feel it or not.

She lowered her dagger, and sheathed the blade. Despite his crude remarks, besides his odd ways, he was her friend. He was someone to talk to. And she knew she'd regret killing him. She sat down in her area, and concentrated on her spell.

Just waiting for him to wake up.



Days pass. The two lost adventures talk of their lives. Growing up on the ridges of Jund, and attending balls in the gardens of Bant. Every time Jourak would go to sleep, Venndi would light another torch.

Her last torch flickered as Jourak woke. His face showed distress. His eyes were sunken in. Black ringed his eyes. His face was haggard. Jourak conjured fire in his hands. "I don't know how much longer I can do this." Jourak sighed, "This spell is designed to light fires, it's not meant to be used for a long time."

The bubble began to fill with smoke, as the fire died slowly.

Jourak's eyes fluttered and he keeled over. He moaned. Venndi moved closer to the man and put her hand on his shoulder. "Jourak are you okay?"

Venndi began to cough uncontrollably.

The smoke obscured all sight. The fire finally died.

“Jourak!”

The protective bubble rippled then collapsed.



Deep within the Naya jungle a Behemoth paused.

It coughed up a cloud of smoke, and then continued on its way.



GODSIRE ART BY JIM MURRAY

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

BY STIGMA LASHER

At last, Kresh reached the highest most point of the Great Volcano.

No being in his sane mind, may it be Goblin or Human, would normally dare climb the Great Volcano. Even the greatest of dragons only fly past, avoiding roosting on it. This is where one of the greatest forces of Jund lay dormant, awakened only if they were disturbed.

The trip here alone took over seven hours, over three of which were spent climbing the Volcano and another two hiding in a tiny cave from a persistent Hellkite that wanted Kresh as an appetizer.

If he could avoid it, he wouldn't want to climb the Volcano either. However, his clan numbers dwindle by the night by creeping horrors and zombies from that cursed piece of land. Although using fire could efficiently burn off a great number of them, but their numbers seem to keep replenishing every day, to the point that the Clan had to burn off the corpses of dead members to save them from being turned to such a horrible abomination. Such undeath was an insult to the natural food chain as well as the natural life cycle, and must be removed from the ecosystem as fast as possible.

Kresh knew something had to be done. Dragons, being the masters of this realm, would never listen to the words of something only worthy as an appetiser, and a great number of them have moved to the other side of Jund, where he heard rumours that there were meaty gigantic beasts and couldn't blame the dragons for migrating over there. He had only one option left, and it is to disturb the slumber of the forces of Jund itself. He was well aware that this expedition would likely be a life-costing one, but to restore Jund's



balance, that death would be a glorious one, even much so as hunting down a hellkite hatchling single-handedly.

Now that he was at the top of the Great Volcano, he had to be doubly cautious, as he had no idea how these forces of nature look like at all. Taking out his sword, he cautiously stepped on the uneven, rocky surface of the peak, being prepared for anything that might just burst out of the lava.

After around forty minutes of cautious stepping about, Kresh began to wonder if these forces were ignoring him, have left the volcano or didn't even exist in the first place. He took another step.

The ground moved.

Sensing danger, Kresh immediately jumped nearly five steps' distance back. The ground he was standing on less than a second ago slashed upwards, slicing off the front half of Kresh's sword cleanly.

Kresh could only stare with awe and he watched as what he thought was the ground rose quickly in front of him. He immediately had positioned his sword in a defensive position and panicked when he saw that what remained of his sword was the bottom half of it.

Kresh could only stare at the now awakened elemental, which was emerging fully from the lava. The elemental stood in the lava, its indistinguishable face looking down at Kresh. It moved nearer and looked like it was smelling the scent of Kresh. Kresh hoped it could smell the rotting stench of the hordes of undead he cleared the previous night and perhaps even understand what Kresh had come for.

With no hint of any emotion or warning, the elemental slashed Kresh across his body diagonally.

Kresh dropped his sword and fell to his knees. His chest and arms were bleeding profusely. 'Is this the end?' he thought 'that not only have I died here, but failed to convince the forces to aid Jund to restore its balance?' True panic ran across his mind as he thought of the days ahead for his clan and for Jund. He panicked over the unnatural death of Jund itself.

Painfully tilting his head, he saw the elemental had doused the arm it used to slash Kresh into the lava. The same arm rose slowly from the lava and over Kresh. Kresh had collapsed from the ground from fatigue and his heavy injuries, facing the sharp arm of the elemental.

A drop of lava fell from the edge of its arm on Kresh.

Kresh felt the burning sensation through his injury and body. He screamed in true scorching pain. However, after a while, both the burning sensation and pain subsided. Kresh looked at his slashed chest. What remained was a black scar that looked as rough as the edges of the elemental.

Kresh immediately got up and looked up. The elemental was gone, leaving a pool of lava where it was. Turning around, he saw the elemental cruising through the lava and realised that the elemental was almost two times larger than it was when it was first awakened. The elemental proceeded to the edge of the peak, used its arms to slash and break some rocks and lava flowed down the volcano, with it cruising along with it, in the direction of the undead frontier.



Kresh felt a glimmer of hope at last. The elemental could understand what he was here for. The price he paid for it was heavy but worth the cost. Slowly he proceeded to descend the Great Volcano. He was too injured to search for another powerful ally like this, with convincing the first nearly costing his life.

As he descended the Volcano, he saw that the elemental was cruising across the savage lands and seemed to be even larger now, and saw a group of thirty goblins splitting up and fleeing for their lives. He understood the elemental's source of power.

"Born of volcanic forces, it thrives on the absolute panic it inspires." Kresh whispered to himself.

'Now those abominations will learn to panic and fear' he thought.

'Not even they stand a chance against a world which would fight for its own survival.'



HOPE

BY SKIBO

"We can't reach for our future standing in the past."

Gret scowled, spoke a word, and set the man ablaze. His screams died down quickly, leaving only silence. That shut the rabble up. There would be no more talk of leaving today.

Gret was merciless. But one had to be merciless in the cruel world of Grixis. Society was a pile of tinder just waiting for a spark of rebellion to burn the world to hell. He wasn't about to let go of his power.

Gret stood in the darkness. He always thought best at night, in his study. The only light in the room was a tiny candle flame. He looked over a map. The parchment was yellowed with age and drawn in blood and charcoal. Across the paper from the circle named Scarhaven was an X drawn with a heavy hand.

The X was new.

The door to the room opened. Gret had half a killing spell out of his mouth before the intruder spoke.

"Gret it's me." Gret stopped and let the magic fall out of his mouth. He felt a surge as the mana flowed back into his blood. The voice belonged to his close friend and confidant Peo.

Peo stepped into the candle's light. "Great show today. The rabble really enjoyed your show of force."



Gret stared intently at the map. "The only thing people respect is power. Show one sign of weakness, and they'll tear you to shreds."

Peo put on a grave face, "Sir, I wish you would reconsider. The people are demanding action. You aren't winning anyone's favor ignoring them."

Gret looked up, "Get me a drink."



Overnight three buildings were burned. The arsonists were brought down by a hail of bone arrows before they could cause anymore damage. The masses demand action.

Gret just sat and looked at this map. Looked at that damn X. His trouble all started weeks ago. Some vagabonds had settled outside of Scarhaven. They spoke of a great forest that rose out of the black dead earth some distance away. As the nomads had said the forest simply sprang up overnight. Gret's personal scouts confirmed the story and gave an exact location for this new forest.

Then the problems started.





Peo entered the study with little urgent news. "Sir, the fire cost us a lot of resources. Not only did we lose three buildings, plus all the supplies they housed, we also lost a lot of moral. No one wants to rebuild. They just want to move on to the forest."

Gret sighed, and placed the map down on the ground. "Here," he pointed towards Scarhaven, "is us." "This," pointing at the X, "is the forest. Between the two is demon territory. We go out there and we won't live to see the forest."

Peo stood straight, "We die either way sir. We stay here and die a slow death, or we die walking towards a new home. And maybe, just maybe, we'll reach it."

"I've spent too long keeping these people alive to turn around and feed them to demons. Survival is key, and the best chance for survival is here."



The guardhouse was attacked at dawn. The rebels came from all angles with swords and bombs. They came out from everywhere like rats descending on a fresh carcass. Most of the guard died without raising a finger. The rest fell to swords and fists.




His hands shook. That's how nervous he was. The smell of anarchy was thick in the town. There were too few guards, and too much dangerous talk.

Peo knocked then entered the room. "More reports. People are demanding that you let them leave."

Gret looked at his friend. His eyes were sunken from lack of sleep, he face aged with stress and tiredness, "What kind of king rules over an empty kingdom?"





"You don't need to stay Gret. You should lead them. Lead a glorious precession to the forest."

"Peo I build this place up. I erected its walls. I've seen it stand up against undead armies. I've seen it withstand demons. Scarhaven is the safest place in the area, perhaps all of Grixis. And you're telling me that I should abandon all that safety in order to go a forest? No, that won't do, won't do at all."

"Well if that's your final decision."

"It is"

Gret felt a pinprick on his neck and swatted at it. He felt a tiny thorn sticking out of his skin. He pulled it out. It was a tiny dark made of bone. Hollow. With black liquid dripping out. Gret looked up at his friend. "Peo?"

"I'm sorry sir. I didn't want this to end this way. I've always admired your work securing Scarhaven. You've kept this town together through the worst of it. But... But when I heard that a forest had risen up in Grixis... I felt something I've never felt before..."

I felt hope

Gret's skin blackened. The discoloration started in the veins then spread out into the rest of the skin. It was spreading towards his face.

"You... you were the one organizing the rebels." Gret's voice was weak.

"I'm sorry," Peo's voice wavered, "I had hoped that if I applied enough pressure you would change your decision. I see now how foolish it was to think I could do so."

Gret screamed as the poison reached his brain.

Peo leaned down over the convulsing body of Gret, "Don't worry Gret. I'll take them to the forest safely. They'll all make it to the forest safely."

Gret's screams died down quickly. leaving only silence.



The next day, people began to get ready. They packed their meager supplies, and said goodbye to their hovels.

The rabble gathered around Peo at the town center. He smiled a leader's smile, pointed in the direction of the forest, and took the first steps towards certain doom.



SWAMP ART BY MARK TEDIN

LAST NIGHT

BY MERCER

He could listen no more to the feared musings of his tribesfolk. Quatalat, the tribal chieftain, had been locked in his hut for hours. He had said that there would be no preparations for war, no calls to arms, for the invaders encased in metal or scales would never be able to survive the hunting grounds of the behemoths, the gargantuans, the ancients. And even as villages and rivers were disappearing as though they had never existed, as new and bizarre lands defiled and rewrote the landscape, and survivors both Nayan and otherwise appeared with increasing frequency and telling insane stories of impossible worlds, Quatalat was living in denial and demanding that the rest of the tribe do the same.

And so, he left the dining grounds, leaping up and climbing a tree that had developed strange, spined bark over the last few weeks. The tree's covering was painful, but the blood-red sap that it now bled helped the climbing.

In the boughs of the massive oak... or whatever it was now... he looked up at the stars, and the sky offered smatters of strange stars and alien constellations that shone in impossible colors.

He heard her voice before he heard her climb. She was always more silent than he was.

"It's frightening, isn't it? I almost got lost trying to find my way back last night. I can't tell direction by the stars anymore."

"It's more than frightening. The godspeakers say that something big will happen at morning. Something bigger than the mountain-of-fire that rose on the other side of the valley."

"Then we have a night."

"A night is not enough. No number of nights will ever be enough."

"Well, it is not up to us," she said, sitting beside him in the bough he'd chosen for himself. "It never is, and never has been. It is a new sky. Let's enjoy it for as long as we're able, and then what happens tomorrow... happens."

It was cold comfort, but there was wisdom in her voice. He cuddled up next to her, and both of them sat in silence. He realized that she was right. He inhaled deeply. Whatever will happen will happen, he thought to himself. Finally, both his companion and the soft light of the stars brought him some peace.



She bathed in fire-hot water, scented with oils and cleansing salts, brushing jasmine and rose flowers across herself. When she finished bathing, she stepped from the ivory bathtub, she uttered the Prayer of Good Graces and lit the appropriate incense. Stepping from the bath chamber, her attendants towed her, brushed her hair, cleaned her teeth, applied a small amount of makeup to accentuate her natural beauty, and set her hair into the braid of a warrior. They then dressed her in cotton cloth, mail underclothes, and strapped her into her plated armor.

After the attendants had locked her pauldrons down and dressed her in her tabbard, she gave them the double-nod that they were dismissed. One attendant simply gave the half-bow that signaled she was waiting for further instructions. The knight, making no sound save the soft brushing of steel on steel, gently touched the attendant's cheek and looked deep into her eyes. She gave the double-nod again. The attendant left.

They were not knights, not warriors, not Sigiled. She would not ask them to die a knight's death.

She strode from her chambers and he greeted her in the castle's grand hall. They gazed deeply into each others' eyes and hearts, and then turned and walked to the top parapet of the main keep.

From there, visible beyond the castle walls, was the profane landscape that the savannah had become. The ground itself had become a cancerous mass of muscle, skin, and bones. The armies of the undead had finally ebbed, if ever so briefly. They would return again; if there were no more to amass on this chunk of desecrated land, they would come from one of the other governances or provinces in Eos, and the lady and lord simply did not have enough knights to fight back another onslaught. There would never be enough knights.

The lady and lord entwined their fingers. Something even greater and more pronounced than what had happened already was coming, and soon. Nevermind that the Sighted had confirmed it; this could be felt in their bones.

He and she both put their hands on their swords, tensing to defend themselves. Whatever happened come dawn, they would face it like knights.



He scrambled from one end of the observatorium to the other, manipulating spheres and gauges and sextants. "No, no, no, no, no, no," he spoke, chanting as though offering a mantra to Bant's angels. He was feeling anger and frustration build up inside of him, and that was strangest of all; he'd had the emotional centers of his brain removed decades ago.

Finally enraged to the point that even basic math was beyond him, he grabbed the mana sextant and hurled it across the room. The discordant din of shattering metal filled the room before running from the silence that followed. He stood, head hung, shoulders slouched, the picture of defeat.

Minutes later, she stepped into the room and gasped. She ran over to him. "What happened? Are you alright?"

"No! Nothing is alright!" he snapped. "I've done the calculations every way I know how! Whatever happens tonight is a clairvoyant dead zone! There's no telling what it does or what happens next!"

Her mouth moved several times, as if trying to remember how to form the words. Then she said, finally, "I've never heard you like this."

He examined at her, keeping an arm's length from her. "I've never been like this. These other worlds are influencing everything about this one. They are a corruption.

"I... I'm so close to figuring this... anomaly out. The equations and symbology aren't adding up, but... I'm so close..."

She reached an appropriate hand to touch his shoulder, but he shied away. She said, "Perhaps there's still time to see events beyond it, or determine its cause?" She gave a very precise smile, designed to communicate hope and confidence. She found it unlikely that there was, despite her facade.

"No. It happens tonight. Tonight just isn't enough."



He paused, and half-heartedly turned his eyes to the windows. She followed his gaze there, and finally walked up to the glass to determine what he wanted her to see.

Her voice cracked then, a hollow, metallic little chirp, not unlike a dog's whimper.

For centuries, since the mages of Esper had mastered the weather and tides, a thin, barely visible grid of light blanketed the sky. It was a rigid, cage-like geometry that painted itself in thin purples and blues against a field of stars, a constancy that every Esperite could look to and reassure themselves that, yes, some things were eternal.

Now the lines were chaotic and formless, as if, she thought, a hateful, bored child had recklessly etched colored lines across the pristine sky.

She felt despair. Hopelessness. And for the first time in her life, she experienced rage.



She huddled amongst the broken, rotted parapets of the old castle, looking on in abject terror towards the sky. The lightning had slowed, and clouds were parting. In the tales her parents had told her, and their parents had told them, and so on, it had been uncounted centuries since the storm had covered the world and stayed there.

She looked into the breaks in the clouds, wondering and fearing what might lurk in that darkness.

He tenderly redressed the banewasp sores that covered her body. He squeezed zathrex fungus, letting the juices flow into her wounds, painful but necessary to prevent disease. The tatters of cloth that they rested on, the closest thing to a bed in this world of eternal desolation, were soaked through with sweat summoned forth by unnaturally warm weather and a shared, unspoken nervousness.

"Hope is torture," she said, using her unmaimed arm to wipe her brow.

"What do you mean?" he said dully.

"The adepts and shamans say the next thing that happens will be big. World-changing. How much will it change, I wonder?"

"I don't understand."

"When I was born, I was told stories. Of ancient Vithia. Of a world not ruled by demons, with ample food and clean water. I was told that the kingdom would return. But believing that maybe it could was worse than anything. Worrying, wondering, trying to find reassurance. I never found anything like peace until I accepted how the world was, and started living in that.

"But now the very world is to change, as if it hasn't enough. And then I wonder... how much could change? Could my mutilated arm be healed? Could my eye see again? Could my banewasp sores close?

"Hope is the worst infection on Grixis. Whatever happens, come morning, it should be destroyed."

"Hush now. We could still escape to one of the other worlds. I hear stories of other humans travelling to the fire-realm and the metal-world and finding help there."

"We would never make it, companion. We would never get past the demon lords that infest the lands on both sides. Even if we did, we'd never make it through the kathari lands."



She sighed, and he did something he didn't understand. He cradled her gently in his arms. He didn't know what it meant to do such a thing, but it seemed right, and she buried her malformed face in his embrace, sobbing gently.

She was right, of course. He had never known even five minutes without fear. It hovered over all those still living, covering them like a shroud. Hope was so much worse. Hope gave the fear meaning.

Still, it was tantalizing, beautiful but dangerous. He was willing to risk the horror of hope dashed if it meant the possibility of hope succeeding. And, he resigned himself, it's not as though we'll have much choice.

Night on Grixis was bleak, merciless, and eternal, but it wouldn't be enough to kill them.



He stood amongst the broken bodies of the reptilian viashino, screaming to the heavens. He'd slaughtered them all; not even the largest of the thrash had been able to severely hurt him.

He needed more.

If what the pitiful outworlders from that ridiculous jungle-place said was true, the end might be here soon. He would not die like them, mewling and fearful of the sky. He would die as a warrior, as a hunter. He would die on his feet.

He screamed. He looked to the soot-choked air (less and less choked every day, as though even the volcanoes and dragons feared what was coming next), and bellowed his war-cry until he was hoarse. He screamed after that, until what had been a bellow of

unfathomable strength, the sort that could call out a hellion or dragon and give him a proper death, strangled to a weak scratch.

It was no use. He'd been trying to get himself killed all night. The smoke cover was beginning to lighten.

There was no night left.

She met him on the way back to what remained of the tribe. There was shockingly little left after so many cataclysms and the invasions of both foreign people and foreign geography. She, though, was still strong, muscular, lean. Beautiful.


"I see you're still alive," she said with a lopsided grin that never failed to make his heart dance.

"Yeah. Denied even a warrior's death."

She embraced him, kissed him. "I have been denied that, too. So I say we live our last morning like we'd live forever."

He looked into her eyes. Such fire! Such lust for life! He had always loved her, for she was everything good in the world wrapped in flesh. He heart hurt, scared only of losing her, his former disgrace forgotten in that moment.

They joined, body and soul, what could be one last chance at joy and happiness. As night finally gave way to dawn, they lay in amongst the jungle foliage, watching the sky. Clouds disappeared. There were hundreds, thousands more stars in the quickly-lightening heavens than any had seen before. As they watched, they could see ephemeral, dreamlike images of earthbergs, lavalanches, iceslides, fleshlakes, and even



stranger phenomena colliding, reforming, and taking even stranger and more wondrous shapes amongst the constellations, an ever changing painting of wonder and awe and terror with the empyrean itself as its canvas.

At the horizon, then, slowly, five discs, multicolored and iridescent, began lifting above the unique topography of their world, bathing everything in a glorious, shimmering brilliance. The brightest light they had ever seen, a luminescence greater than they could ever describe, forced them to look at the event, and though their eyes should have hurt beyond measure, they felt only a renewed serenity in their very souls.

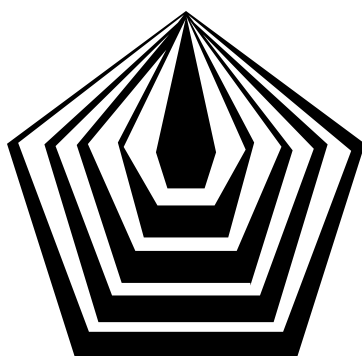
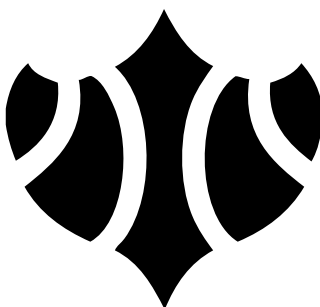
Five suns, shining of liquid summer, tempestuous gold, perpetual storm, radiant void, and molten strength.

The suns rose in a slow arc towards each other, their light growing every brighter as they approached. Aching beautiful minutes passed, and finally, slowly, the suns touched, bathing everything in their vision in colors they'd never before seen and possibilities they'd never before contemplated.

There were no words.

He held her close, their eyes transfixed to the glorious new heavens. He whispered something to her, and she smiled. She lifted her palm skyward, as though she could cradle the newborn sun.

Small enough to hold in her hand, but full of possibility and promise.



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Thanks to everyone at the Magic Expanded Multiverse community who helped make this anthology possible.



MOURN NOT FOR SUMMER ROSES

by Skibo the First

Mourn not for summer roses,
When the winter comes at last.
They had their time for living,
Now that time has come to pass.

We stand upon a crossroads,
Of what shall be and what has been.
You fight to hold onto yesterday,
A fight you aren't going to win.

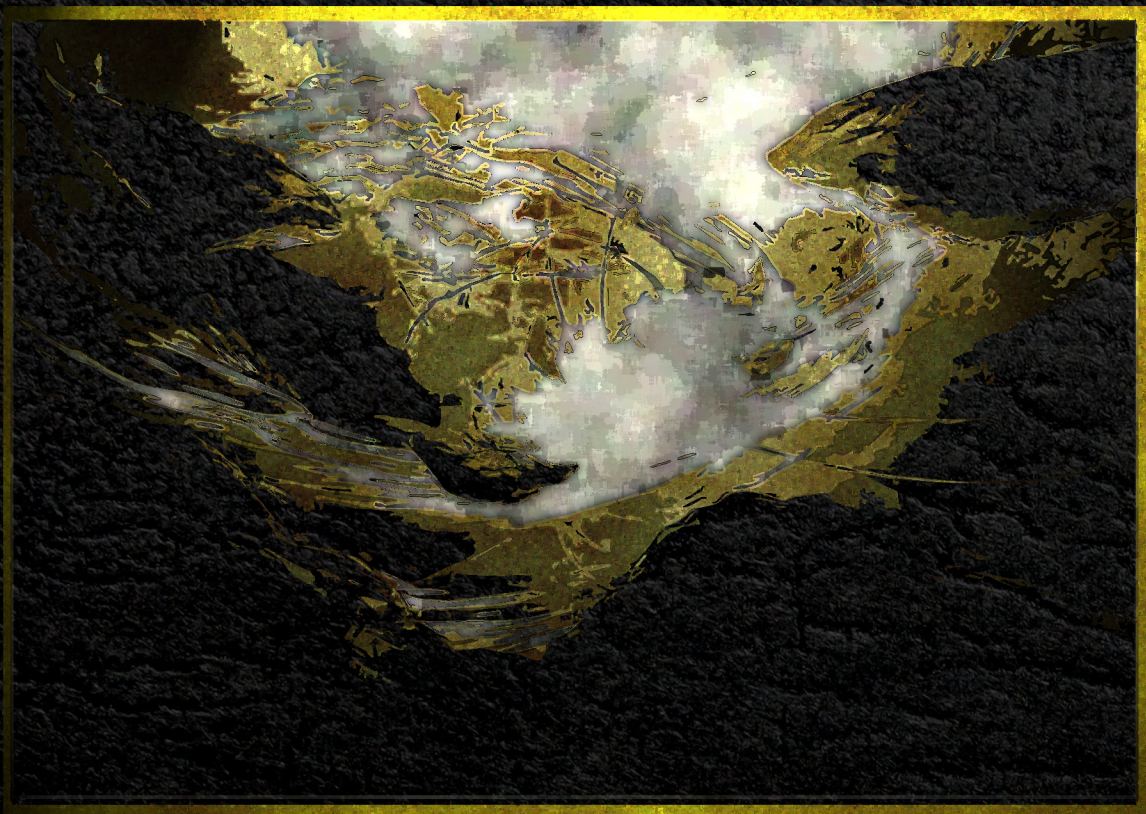
For winter is approaching,
Our world is near its end,
Things are quickly changing,
We must change with them my friend.

So shed a tear, if you must, for that land you love,
And promise you will never forget.
Though the world is new, we'll see it through,
Let us not linger in regret.

The Magic Expanded Multiverse presents:

The Alara Anthology





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